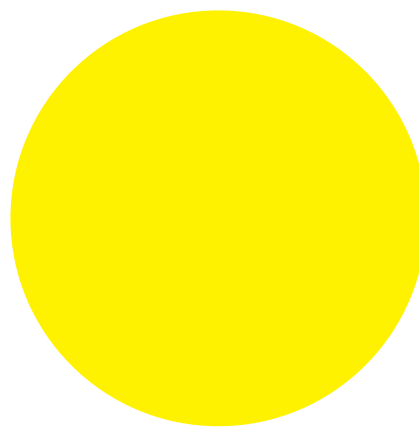


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Protracted conflict exacerbating Israel's challenges

The Israeli military and government are under increasing internal pressure to swiftly achieve their self-imposed objective of eliminating Hamas.

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Iran's 'Wheel and Desert' wins Best Short Film Award in Kazakhstan



Iranian short film, 'Wheel and Desert,' written and directed by Reza Sabetpour, received the Best Short Film Award at the 11th Bastau International Film Festival in Kazakhstan, held in Almaty from December 12 to 16.

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Russia eyes additional oil export cuts: *Novak*



Russia said it would deepen oil export cuts in December by potentially 50,000 barrels per day or more, earlier than promised, as the world's biggest exporters try to support the global oil price. Saudi Arabia and Russia, the world's two biggest oil exporters, called in December for all OPEC+ members to join an agreement on output cuts after a fractious meeting of the producers' club, Reuters reported.

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Riyadh shortly after the meeting of OPEC+, which brings together the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Russia and other allies. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak was quoted by Russia's three main news agencies as saying that Russia would deepen cuts beyond the 300,000 barrels per day of cuts already agreed for this year.

"Already in December we will add additional volumes," Novak was quoted as saying by Interfax news agency. "By how much, we'll see based on the results of December - there may be an additional 50,000 bpd, maybe more." Russia had pledged to a cut of 300,000 bpd compared to the May-June exports - and to keep at that level until the end of the year.

In December, Russia agreed to deepen those cuts to 500,000 bpd in the first quarter of 2024, the Russian agencies said.

Due to promises made to OPEC+, Russia's oil exports in 2023 will total less than the 247 million tonnes used in Russia's main macro-economic forecasts, Novak said.

Novak said he hoped that Gazprom and Chinese producer CNPC could soon agree on the contract conditions for gas sales through the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline.

Russia has been in talks for years about building the Power of Siberia-2 which will carry about 50 billion cubic metres of gas a year from Yamal in northern Russia to China via Mongolia.

"We expect that the company should reach an agreement as soon as possible," Novak said.

Raisi unveils online economic system

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi launched on Monday the "Iran Economic Observatory" system to monitor the activities of both the private and public sectors. The system aims to ensure the integrity of Iran's economic data and information, provide accurate and up-to-date monitoring of the information, create

transparency in the performance of economy-related ministries as well as all state-run companies, and enable daily monitoring of the latest status of organizations subordinate to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, IRNA reported.

Raisi said in November that Iran gives priority to the

expansion of political and economic relations with Muslim and neighboring countries.

Raisi made the remarks during a meeting with his Uzbek counterpart, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in Tashkent, which hosts the 16th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).



Tehran, Muscat to launch PTA to boost trade: *Minister*



Iranian Minister of Industry Abbas Aliabadi (l) speaks with his Omani counterpart Qais Mohammed Al Yousef in Muscat, Oman on December 18, 2023. **TASNIM**

Iran's minister of industry, mine and trade said Iran and Oman will launch a preferential trade agreement (PTA) to increase annual trade to \$3.5 billion.

The two countries are targeting \$3.5 billion in annual trade in 2024, Abbas Aliabadi stated, according to IRNA.

Facilitating trade for businesspersons and removing the existing barriers facing merchants of the country are the main objectives of the ministry,

he said, adding that reducing trade and business tariffs is one of the measures taken in this regard.

He drew a comparison between a PTA and a free trade agreement (FTA) and noted that the tariff rates in a PTA are slightly higher and more limited than an FTA, but have a good effect on the amount of trade.

Given the Omani membership in the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC), Iran can launch the PTA with Oman, which

would lead to an increase in the volume of trade between the two countries, the industry minister highlighted.

Iran and Oman have the potential to increase their annual trade to \$5 billion, Aliabadi emphasized.

He called on businesspersons and traders of the country to make their utmost efforts to promote trade ties with the Sultanate of Oman, since the two countries have established excellent diplomatic relations.

Dakar to host 5th Iran-Senegal Joint Economic Cooperation Commission: *TPO*



The 5th Iran-Senegal Joint Economic Cooperation Commission will be held in the Senegalese capital of Dakar tomorrow, after 12 years, announced an official with the Trade Promotion Or-

ganization (TPO). Head of the African Department of the TPO Leila Baghban said the African Continent is rich with natural resources, high potentials, so Iranian traders should

seize the opportunity to enhance their trade with African states, reported Tasnim news agency.

She put the value of goods exported from Iran to the African states in 2022 at \$1.3 billion, and said the bilateral trade reached about \$500 million in the first eight months of the current Iranian year (March 21 to November 22, 2023).

Raisins, dried nuts and food products are the main exported goods to the African states, the TPO official noted.

Iran, Azerbaijan to ink agreement on Aras road corridor

Iran and Azerbaijan will officially sign an agreement on the implementation of the Aras road corridor within the next month, Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrpash told reporters.

The Aras road corridor will connect the Eastern Zangazur economic region of Azerbaijan to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic by passing through Iran's territory, according to Trend news agency.

The minister noted that an event will be held in connection with the signing



of the corridor agreement. He also said that representatives of Russia will be present at the event. Bazrpash said that with the appointment of the contractor company, the process of construction

of the Aras corridor has started.

This process will be carried out within the framework of the construction of a bridge over the Aras River and the construction of a highway.



Iran Trans Expo 2023 kicked off in Tehran

The 7th Iran International Exhibition of Transportation, Logistics and Related Industries, dubbed "Iran Trans Expo," was inaugurated in Tehran on Monday. The exhibition, with the motto, "Smart Transportation, Transit and Economic Development," was launched with the partici-

pation of Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrpash, IRNA reported.

A sum of 85 domestic and foreign start-ups and new technology-based firms (NTBFs) are taking part in the event, showcasing the latest achievements and products in the transpor-

tation industry to promote competitiveness among the companies and entities active in the relevant sector.

On the sidelines of the exhibition, it is planned to unveil 22 products manufactured by companies in the field of transportation and road-building equip-

ment and machinery. Organized by Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) in collaboration with the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, the Fund for Innovation and Prosperity of Unions and related associations, the exhibition will run through December 20.

China's economy poised for more opportunities than challenges next year

China will see more favorable conditions than unfavorable ones for economic development next year, as positive factors supporting high-quality development continue to accumulate, according to a Chinese official.

China's economic develop-

ment still has enormous opportunities despite sluggish global growth and insufficient domestic demand, said the official of the Office of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs, Xinhua reported.

The remarks came as the

country held its annual Central Economic Work Conference a week ago to decide the priorities for the economic work in 2024.

China is home to a super-large market with the biggest potential in the world. As social expectation gradually improves,

high savings will help boost consumption and investment, the official said.

A series of government policies, including the issuance of 1 trillion yuan (about \$141 billion) in additional government bonds, reductions in interest rates and reserve requirement

ratios, and tax and fee cuts, will continue to take effect next year, the official said.

"As the government rolls out more policies next year, the synergy effect of existing and new policies will work together to propel economic recovery," the official said.

Visit mysterious and captivating Karaftu Cave in Kurdistan Province



Iranica Desk

Karaftu Cave, a natural marvel of Kurdistan Province, is situated 67 kilometers from the city of Divandarreh. This limestone and ancient cave was formed during the Mesozoic era and has been inhabited and utilized by humans at different times. One of the reasons for the significance of Karaftu Cave is the presence of a valuable Greek inscription on the third level, which links this site to Hercules, one of the ancient Greek gods. Karaftu Cave is registered on Iran's National Heritage List. It is one of the largest, mysteri-

ous, and captivating caves in the country. This cave is nestled in a stunning and profound valley, in a limestone mountain range, surrounded by numerous shelters, crevices, and cavities. In winter and cold weather, the cave is warm, while in the summer it is cool due to a constant breeze inside the cave. Karaftu Cave was formed during the third geological period, emerging from water; even now, there is water in some parts of it, requiring the use of small boats to explore distinct sections of it. Karaftu Cave has been used by humans during various periods, from prehistoric times to the Is-

lamic era. The cave's strategic location and favorable climate have made it an attractive settlement for ancient civilizations. Archaeological excavations have revealed evidence of human habitation dating back to prehistoric times. The cave's walls are adorned with intricate carvings and paintings that depict scenes from daily life, religious ceremonies, and mythological stories. One of the most significant discoveries in Karaftu Cave is a Greek inscription on the third level. The inscription is written in ancient Greek script and describes a heroic deed performed by Hercules. The inscription dates back to

around 200 BCE and provides insights into the cultural exchange that took place between Greece and Persia during antiquity. Karaftu Cave's natural beauty and historical significance make it a popular destination for tourists and researchers alike. The cave's unique geological features, such as stalactites, stalagmites, and underground rivers, are a testament to its ancient formation process. The cave's cool temperature and constant breeze provide relief from the scorching heat outside during summer months. Throughout history, Karaftu Cave has been studied by many

archaeologists, and maps have been created from it. Robert Koldewey, a German archaeologist, visited the cave in 1818 CE. The entrance of the cave is located at an altitude of 20-25 meters above sea level and did not have staircases for access in the past. However, currently, it can be accessed by 180 steps. The main path of the cave is approximately 750 meters long and its ceiling height varies from one to twelve meters. The cave has multiple vaulted halls with different heights and winding corridors that connect to each other, but it is still impossible for anyone to completely map and

understand all of them. In addition, due to the excavations made in the surrounding rocks in previous eras, it is unclear how many rooms and passages exist in the entire structure. The cave has four levels of architectural rock formations. In each level, there are rooms and corridors leading to the outside of the cave. The fourth level of the cave is more beautiful. In the third level, there is a high degree of precision in carving rooms and creating ceilings. The stairs and platforms on this level are well-designed, and the windows and corridors are beautifully decorated.

Social fabric of Central Asian poets and 'literary return' movement

Biographical anthologies from the eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries provide evidence for establishing the connections among individual poets that would later become known as the founders of the 'literary return' movement. In writing about a Central Asian biographical anthology from the Safavid period, Robert McChesney commented that, while the goal of *tadhkiras* is often 'to explain in a formal and conventional way individual creativity rather than social relations of individuals and groups', they nonetheless offer a great deal of information regarding the social, cultural and economic circumstances of the time. The biographical anthologies of the Zand and Qajar periods do just that, identifying the relationships and connections among poets later known as the founders of the 'literary return' movement. They provide a roster of the poets associated with Seyyed Ali Mushtaq Isfahani's literary society, the affiliations among poets after Mushtaq's death, the diverse class backgrounds of participants

and the lineages of student-instructor relationships that stretch from the movement's early days in the mid-to-late eighteenth century to poets located at the Qajar court of Fat'h-Ali Shah later on. There are several categories of affiliations that define the social network among the 'literary return' movement from its early gestational form in Mushtaq's literary society to the movement's more formal institutionalization at the Qajar court of Fat'h-Ali Shah: instructional relationships between teachers and students, bonds of friendship, and family and professional relationships. The existence of these multiple, and often overlapping, lines of association helps to delineate the diverse ways in which the poets of a nascent 'literary return' movement were connected with one another. Mushtaq's student Azar delineates many of the poets affiliated with Mushtaq's literary society. Azar cites in particular his friendships with Sahba (died in 1777), who, like him,

was one of Mushtaq's early disciples, and with Hatif (died 1784). The three poets together would later organise Mushtaq's poetry into a collection (*divan*) after his death. Also among this early circle of associates was Aqa Muhammad "Ashiq" Isfahani, a tailor by profession, and Rafiq Isfahani, a vegetable seller. Their participation too points to the humble professions of some of the circle's members and the continued practice from Safavid times of poetic production among Isfahan's urban professionals. Poets not definitely tied to Mushtaq's literary society, either as participant or student, also form a part of this larger network, such as Sulayman 'Sabahi' Bidguli (d. 1793). Either in Isfahan or in his birthplace of Kashan, Sabahi met Azar and Hatif, leading the three to embark on lifelong friendship. Indeed, the triumvirate of Azar, Hatif and Sabahi has been heralded by the historian Dunbuli as Mushtaq's heirs in overthrowing the method of poetry whose meanings had become



A poem of Mushtaq



Seyyed Ali Mushtaq Isfahani

'frigid and tasteless'. The strong bonds of friendship and close companionship between Azar, Hatif and Sabahi are well-recorded, both in biographical anthologies and

in their poetry. Their poems, often in conversation with each other, offer some of the best evidence of how these poets viewed themselves and their surroundings.

The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter, 'Reformation and Reconstruction of Poetic Networks: Isfahan c.1722–1801', from a book entitled, 'Remapping Persian Literary History, 1700–1900', written by Kevin L. Schwartz, published by Edinburgh University Press.

Leader of Iranian Jews:

Israel's massacre of Gazans unjustifiable

Jews had a peaceful life in Al-Quds before Zionism

By Ebrahim Beheshti
Staff writer

Is the regime of Israel the representative of Jews worldwide? What is the connection between Israel's performance and the teachings of Judaism? How do Jews opposed to Zionism think of Israeli crimes in Gaza? What solutions do peace-seeking Jews and those opposed to Zionism support to end the war and oppression against the Palestinians? These are the questions Iran Daily has posed to Younes Hamami Lalehzar, the leader of the Jews in Iran. The 56-year-old chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Iran, in addition to his religious studies, has also studied medicine inside the country. In an interview with Iran Daily, he sees Zionism as different from Judaism and believes that holding a free and inclusive election and forming a unified government in all occupied territories and Palestine could be an acceptable solution to end war and occupation.



● ALI HASANPOUR/IRAN DAILY

The Israeli regime claims to be the government or representative of Jews worldwide. How accurate do you think this statement is?

The governing regime in Israel, namely, the Zionist regime, is derived from the perspectives of the "Zionist movement" that took shape in the late 19th century. Following nationalist movements emerging in Europe, a nationalist movement among some Jews, known as Zionist nationalism, formed, representing a purely political movement. According to Jewish beliefs, the Torah promises the Holy Land to the descendants of Abraham, his son Isaac, and subsequently to the descendants of Isaac and Jacob. When Moses leads the Israelites in rebellion against the oppression of the Pharaoh in Egypt, he guides them toward the Promised Land (Bayt al-Maqdis). After Moses's death, they establish governance in the Holy Land under his successor, Joshua, the most famous of which is the rule of the prophets David and Solomon. Solomon builds the Solomon's Temple (also known as the First Temple) in Jerusalem or Al-Quds. According to Jewish beliefs, during the time of the promised Messiah, all Jews will gather in the Holy Land. Over the more than 2000 years since the destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Romans, Jews have hoped and anticipated a return to Jerusalem or the Promised Land. However, they have never taken practical steps themselves to conquer Al-Quds or establish a government. Zionism, however, uses this Jewish aspiration and employs "the end justifies the means" approach, con-

trary to the Torah, to shape the ideology of Zionism for the establishment of a government in the Holy Land. "Zion" means the desire for the place of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

According to a classification of Zion meaning a passion for Jewish holy sites, there are Religious Zionism and Political Zionism. Religious Zionism implies an affinity for the holy sites of the Jews in Jerusalem, much like how Muslims have holy and revered sites. However, they are not inclined to conquer those holy places through war or any means. In contrast, Political Zionism, unlike Religious Zionism, which awaits the appearance of the Messiah, is not waiting for the Messiah's arrival and asserts that they will take control of the Holy Land by any means necessary.

It's important to note that the political regime in Israel is not a religious regime, and only a few significant issues, such as divorce and laws related to halal or forbidden foods, are under the jurisdiction of religious authorities. The legal framework of the Zionist regime is secular. However, since it was founded based on Jewish ideals, it sees itself as the defender of Jews worldwide. This is while the initial opposition to the formation of the Zionist party and the Zionist political ideology came from Jews themselves.

Is Zionism a conventional or secularized form of the Jewish faith, or is it a deviation from Judaism?

Zionists do not claim religious piety; they are a political party. Groups like ISIS claim to be true representatives of Islam. Zionists, however, make no such

claims because fundamentally, they are not a religious movement. Instead, they utilize certain religious elements whenever it serves their interests. For instance, in this regime, there are two types of courts, and in state or government-related courts, judgments are not based on the Torah. A few years ago, there was a dispute where some religious individuals wanted only one verse from the Torah, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one," to be recited in the morning ceremonies at schools. However, the Ministry of Education rejected this, stating that the system is secular. Therefore, Zionists exploit Jewish beliefs whenever it suits their interests.

You mentioned that Jews have not taken any action over the past 2000 years to establish a government and return to the Promised Land. Is this due to the interpretation of religious teachings and the Torah, or is it because of a lack of power and the possibility of forming a government?

Even in circumstances where conditions were favorable, they never took steps to establish a government. The Holy Land has never been completely devoid of Jews throughout history. During a period when the Romans occupied it, they did not allow Jews to stay in the city of Jerusalem. However, during Muslim rule over the Bayt al-Maqdis, Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together, and until the establishment of the Zionist regime in 1948, they coexisted. Given the numerous shared beliefs and jurispru-

dential aspects between Judaism and Islam, the anti-Jewish sentiments, primarily found in Western and Christian countries, were absent in Islamic countries. Many Muslim scholars have been defenders of the rights of religious minorities. This peaceful coexistence has been disrupted since the establishment of the Zionist regime. Even groups of Jews residing in the Bayt al-Maqdis refused to obtain Israeli citizenship and identification cards, leading many of these dissenters to migrate from occupied territories.

According to Jewish beliefs, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem requires certain prerequisites and necessities that are dependent on the advent of the promised Messiah. Therefore, in periods when conditions were somewhat favorable, they took no action to form a government. For example, about 800 years ago, when the Fatimids ruled this land, a prominent Jewish figure named "Moses ben Maimon" had significant power, influence, and authority in the Fatimid court. However, he never chose to reside in the Bayt al-Maqdis or use his power and authority in Jerusalem.

In the Jewish faith, like other religions, there are likely different sects and inclinations. What does the religious statement that Jews or the Children of Israel are the chosen people or a superior race mean? In the third chapter of the book of Amos, God addresses Amos, saying, "You alone have I chosen from all the families of the earth."



What does this choice or being chosen imply? Are the supremacist interpretations held by some Jews living in occupied territories based on such religious statements?

This chosen status does not have racial implications. While the core of Judaism or followers of Prophet Moses are indeed the Children of Israel, as stated in the Torah, many Egyptians who were not part of the Children of Israel also believed in Moses due to Pharaoh's oppression and tyranny. They joined the Children of Israel and Moses in leaving Egypt. According to the Torah, this superiority or chosen status of the Children of Israel has two perspectives. One is through relative connection and link of the Children of Israel to great personalities and prophets like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In essence, this superiority refers to the lineage and descent of the Children of Israel. However, the prerequisite for enjoying this privilege is that the Children of Israel or followers of the Jewish faith must behave, act, and believe like those great figures or continue their path.

The other aspect of this superiority revolves around the fact that the Children of Israel or followers of Judaism are the first community to unanimously become monotheistic. This matter is also mentioned in the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims. Therefore, by virtue of being the first in monotheism, they are considered chosen. However, this chosenness is not a carte blanche. As stated in the Torah, the Children of Israel are the chosen people on the condition that they execute divine commandments. Therefore, being chosen does not imply superiority or racism.

You mentioned divine commandments. The Ten Commandments, all call for a peaceful coexistence with others and worship of the Lord. They emphasize values such as "thou shalt not kill." Unlike what is observed in Zionist behavior, it appears that the teachings of Judaism advocate compassion to-

ward others, even adversaries.

Yes, that's right. When Judaism emerged, other nations were generally idolatrous. Judaism, as outlined in the Torah, does not even encourage the elimination of idol worshippers. Prophet Solomon, who was both a prophet and a king, made peace treaties with many neighbors who were idolaters. Judaism is not fundamentally a proselytizing religion that seeks to make everyone Jewish. Throughout their history, Jews living alongside different religions or nations have mostly coexisted peacefully. A notable example is present in Iran itself. The presence of Jews in Iran dates back to before the formation of Iran, to the time when the Medes and Persians were settled. In the Book of Kings, Volume 2, it is mentioned that when the Assyrian king brought some Jews into captivity, he settled them in the cities of Media (western provinces of Iran). The Torah itself states that you were strangers in the land of Egypt and experienced life in bondage, so do not treat others as captives.

During World War II, Jews themselves became victims of the ideology of superiority and racial supremacy. The supremacist behavior adopted by the Israeli regime for followers of Judaism should be a subject of contemplation.

In one of the protests against Israel's aggression toward the people of Gaza in Britain or the United States, an elderly Jewish man said, "I am a survivor of the Holocaust. My parents were killed in that incident, and I understand the pain and suffering of the people in Gaza." Every political party or regime has its own propaganda machine and narratives. The Israeli regime, by referring to certain events or claims, advertises a kind of victimhood for itself and labels any opposition to Zionism as opposition to Judaism, creating a dichotomy between Jewish-Arab or Jewish-Islamic relations. However, the roots of this propaganda go back to the divisions and discords fomented by Britain in Palestine. Before the

establishment of the Israeli regime, Jews lived peacefully alongside Muslims and Christians in Palestine. Some policies by certain countries have also fueled Israel's propaganda. For instance, the government of Iraq expelled Jews living in the country at one point, providing a platform for Zionist propaganda that claimed Jews were not safe anywhere in the world except in Israel. Or they claimed that Arabs and Muslims were all united against Jews and wanted to annihilate them. Zionists aim to create a sense of victimhood for themselves and encourage Jews worldwide to migrate to Israel through such propaganda.

In the past couple of months, events occurred in some countries that Israelis interpreted as anti-Semitic. For example, attacks on synagogues in Europe, which were, of course, reprehensible acts. Those who attacked synagogues are either truly against Judaism, or they are unaware of the distinction between Judaism and Zionism. However, Israel's propaganda machine and its supportive media worldwide brand any opposition to Zionism as anti-Semitism. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between Zionism and Judaism. As seen in the Islamic Republic of Iran, emerging from an Islamic revolution, in the very first year after victory, Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, emphasized that Zionism is separate from Judaism as a religion. Ayatollah Khomeini, the current Leader of the Islamic Revolution, has continued this policy, preventing Zionists from taking advantage of Judaism.

In your view, as a follower of the Jewish faith, does the level of violence, destruction, and killing of people in Gaza over the past two months justify with any rationale or perspective?

Causing harm to civilians, destroying public and non-military places, and killing non-combatants, even in war, have no justification whatsoever. The goal of the Israeli regime has been to evacuate the

entire Gaza Strip of non-Jewish or non-Zionist residents. The October 7 attack by Hamas served as a pretext to operationalize this objective. Perhaps if Operation Al-Aqsa Storm did not happen, a similar situation would have occurred under a different pretext in the near future. Israelis claim the right to defend themselves against what they characterize as Hamas's violent actions in attacking occupied territories. However, under this justification, they aim to empty the Gaza Strip of its Muslim and Arab inhabitants.

You mentioned that various groups of Jews are opposed to Zionism. Don't you think the formation of a global union or confederation of anti-Zionist Jews could contribute to better clarity and enlightenment in distinguishing between Judaism and Zionism?

One of the ancient Jewish groups opposed to Zionism is Neturei Karta. Representatives of this group came to Iran a few years ago, and during the recent trip of Iran's president to New York to attend in the United Nations General Assembly, some rabbis from this group met with him. They had previously aligned themselves with the Palestinian Fatah movement. In Israel itself, there is an active group of Jews called Peace Now, advocating for peaceful coexistence with Palestinian Muslims. However, within the political and parliamentary structure, they do not wield significant influence. There is also a group of Jewish scholars residing in Islamic countries who almost share the same idea of promoting peace and peaceful coexistence. The formation of such a union would undoubtedly have more power and cohesion.

Based on the teachings of Judaism, what solutions can be proposed to end the oppression of the Israeli regime against the Palestinians?

No monotheistic religion, including Judaism, accepts that anyone or a group should be subjected to oppression simply because some desire to maintain their fa-

vorable situation. One of the fundamental beliefs is not to steal or seize. Politically, both sides are attempting to eliminate the other, yet neither has succeeded so far. Therefore, practically, there is no solution other than coexistence and tolerance for each other. The proposed solution, as suggested by the leader of Iran's Revolution, is to hold a free and nationwide election there, which could be a viable solution. If all residents of the occupied territories and Palestinians think in a way that we all live in this region, and for a better situation, the appropriate path in the initial stage is to tolerate and coexist with each other, a suitable foundation could be laid to end these decades-long wars. Of course, coexistence and fair living mean not having some with more privileges and others facing significant restrictions. A free and inclusive election based on the understanding that everyone has the right to life might lead to a positive outcome. War and conflict are undesirable anywhere in the world, especially in a land sacred to all religions. Peace in Palestine might bring tranquility not only to the region but also to the entire world.

So, you believe in the solution of one state with two peoples based on holding free and inclusive elections where everyone has equal rights and privileges?

Yes. There must be a fair framework that ensures the interests and rights of everyone.

The prelude to this solution or any other solution is the immediate establishment of a cease-fire in Gaza and the cessation of the killing of people.

Yes, absolutely. Right now, there is senseless bombing and massacre happening in Gaza. It's unacceptable that, under the pretext of the possibility of some members of Hamas being there, they bomb the place and kill innocent people. War itself has its framework and laws. They should not kill defenseless and civilian individuals. Cease-fire is the top priority.



Iranians collect four medals in Asian Youth Chess Ch'ships



MNA

Sports Desk

Iranians bagged one gold and three bronze medals at the Asian Youth Chess Championships 2023 in Al Ain, the UAE. All four medals came in the blitz competitions of the event, which is being held across six age groups. Ramtin Kakavand claimed the gold in the boys' under-10 contests, with Mohammad-Taha Arkak and Seyyed Kan'an Pourmousavi taking double bronzes in the under-eight and under-12 categories respectively. In the girls' competitions, Niusha Mohammadi also settled for a third-spot finish in the under-14 class – a second medal for the Iranian girls in tournament following Roshia Akbari's under-12 bronze in the rapid event. Iran is being represented by 13 players in the tournament, which will come to an end on Friday.

Persian Gulf Pro League preview: How will Tehran archrivals fare after derby brawl?

Sports Desk

Persepolis and Esteghlal will be back in the Persian Gulf Pro League action today, looking to get back to winning ways after sharing the spoils in the most controversial Tehran derby in years, which was dominated by late VAR interventions and press-conference swipes from both sides. The post-derby game has always provided a tricky test for the two archrivals, as both look to move on from the tensions and emotions of the biggest occasion in the Iranian top-flight club football. Awaiting the Reds and Blues today are the relegation-zone strugglers. Sitting atop table, Esteghlal will fancy an easy matchup at the Azadi Stadium against Nassaji Mazandaran and legendary keeper Seyyed Mahdi Rahmati – now in charge of Nassaji's bench – who will step into the game on the back of Thursday's 2-1 loss away to Shams Azar and have only managed two victories in 11 league outings this season. However, a wobble at home could see Javad Nekounam's men surrender the top spot

to in-form Sepahan, which trails the Blues by a point and will be chasing a fifth league win on the bounce when playing away to Havadar in today's early kickoff. Having failed to leave the pitch with maximum points in four of the previous league matches, the Tehran Reds are four points adrift of the top with a game in hand and will visit Ahvaz to take on bottom-club Esteghlal Khuzestan, knowing they can't afford a further slip-up if they are to keep pace with Esteghlal and Sepahan in the title run-in. The good news for Yahya Golmohammadi and his men, who felt unlucky to concede to a VAR-given spot-kick in the stoppage time last time out, is that today's opponent is yet to win a game this season, suffering eight defeats in 12 games. Elsewhere, Sham Azar, unbeaten in seven, welcomes San'at Naft Abadan, which will be hoping to avoid a third consecutive defeat in the league. Iralco and Golgozar Sirjan – equal on points – will go head-to-head in Arak, with Zob Ahan hosting Foolad Khuzestan.



Persepolis striker Shahab Zahedi (red) is seen in action against Esteghlal's Rouzbeh Cheshmi during a 1-1 draw in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on Dec. 14, 2023. ALIREZA SOTAKBAR/ISNA

First 32-team Club World Cup to be played in US

BBC – FIFA has announced the first 32-team Club World Cup from 2025 will be played in the United States from 15 June to 13 July.

The tournament will feature clubs from each of the six confederations, with Europe entering 12 teams. Chelsea, Real Madrid and Manchester City have qualified automatically as the most recent Champions League winners in the four-year cycle.

Bayern Munich, Paris St-Germain, Inter Milan, Porto and Benfica have also secured places in the tournament in 2025 via the coefficient pathway. FIFA president Gianni Infantino confirmed the news at a meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on Sunday.

The revamped format will be played in the same slot where FIFA has previously held the Confederations Cup for international teams, a year before the World Cup.

Football's world governing body said the summer dates had been set to ensure the scheduling aligns with the international match calendar, and to allow sufficient rest time before the start of the domestic seasons.

The powerful European Clubs' Association has backed the tournament but Maheta Molango, head of the Professional Footballers' Association, said FIFA's persistence to go ahead with the expansion shows a lack of concern for player welfare.

"Players have become pawns in a battle for primacy between football's governing bodies," he added. "With no-one willing to take a step back or to work collaboratively to create a sustainable calendar.

"These decisions have consequences – not just for players who are being pushed until they break. But for the future quality of these tournaments, with players becoming injured or withdrawing from games as they make their own decisions about how to manage what have become ridiculous demands."

In a statement, Fifpro, the world players' union, said there was also "a disregard" for players' "personal and family lives".

It added: "The expanded competition will undercut the rest and recovery time of these players at the end of the 2024-25 season, and further disrupt national employment markets by changing the balance between national and international competitions. "Players will have to perform at the end of an 11-month season with little prospect of getting enough rest before the following season starts.

"The extreme mental and physical pressures at the pinnacle of the game is the principal concern of players with multiple club and national team competitions, leading to exhaustion, physical injuries, mental health issues, diminished performance, and risks to career longevity."

FIFA also announced a new Intercontinental Cup competition from December 2024, which will see the winners of the Champions League face a team that comes through intercontinental play-offs.

Moya unsure how Nadal will cope with Grand Slam demands on comeback

REUTERS – Rafa Nadal has shown good progress in training since recovering from a hip injury but his coach Carlos Moya still worries about how the former world number one's body will hold up against the rigours of Grand Slam tennis.

The 37-year-old suffered a muscle issue at Melbourne Park in January that wiped out his season but will return at Brisbane this month before playing in the Jan. 14-28 Australian Open where he won two of his 22 Grand Slam titles. The Spaniard, who had surgery in June, has said 2024 could be his final year on tour and has stepped up training in recent months in order to make a comeback and ensure he finishes his career on court.

"Rafa's going to go from training, which he's doing very well, to competing. It's impossible to have the same conditions in training as in a match," Moya said in an interview with the ATP Tour.

"Playing the best of five sets, win, rest, return to court two days later ... That's the doubt I have right now, especially for a Grand Slam. But we have time. If the Australian Open started tomorrow, it would be a real fear.

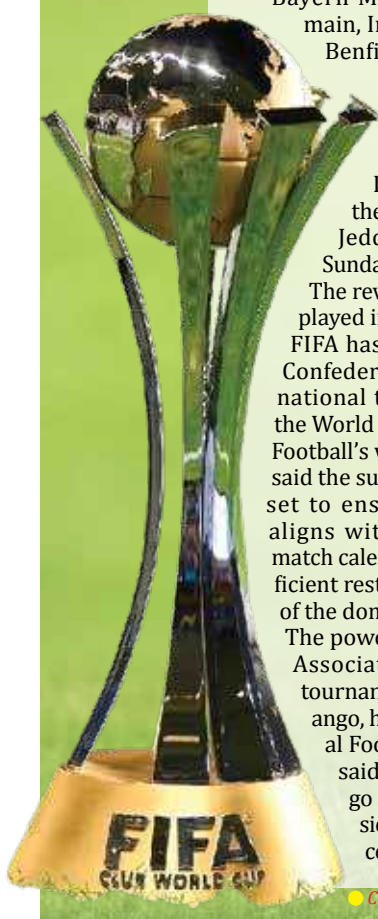
"There's still a month left, a tournament before in Brisbane, demanding training ... I think all of this will put him in a position to be able to endure



LOREN ELLIOTT/REUTERS

it. But now that's my fear." Nadal dropped out of the top 100 for the first time in 20 years earlier this season and has slipped to number 668 but is eligible for a protected ranking having been injured and not competing for at least six months. However, Moya said Nadal

would not be able to avoid strong opponents in the early rounds and would need favourable draws to build up his rhythm. "I've never been of the thought that Rafa needs rhythm because he's too good for that," Moya said. "But now the situation is different."



CGTN

Israel using starvation as 'war weapon': HRW

70% of Gaza victims women, children

International Desk

The Palestinian Health Ministry says women and children comprise 70 percent of the nearly 19,500 people killed in the Gaza Strip during Israel's bloody aggression against the besieged territory.

In a statement on Sunday, the Ramallah-based ministry said the death toll covers a period of 70 days between October 7, 2023, and December 15, 2023, Press TV reported.

More than 300 health sector workers, 86 journalists, 135 employees of the UN agency for the Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), and approximately 35 civil defense workers are among the death toll, it added.

The ministry also said that over 51,100 Palestinians have been wounded in the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, with scores of other people unaccounted for.

It further noted that only eight out of 36 Gaza hospitals are partially functional, and that occupancy rates have soared to 206 percent in inpatient departments and 250 percent in intensive care units.

Meanwhile, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini raised the alarm at the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza.

"By any account, I haven't seen anything of this scale," he said in an interview with Al Jazeera on Sunday.



"Everything is absolutely unprecedented and staggering... In 40 days, more women and children were killed than the number of civilians in the Ukraine war."

The UN's undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs says he has seen no evidence that Israel's assault on southern Gaza is more precise than that carried out in the north.

"I've been disappointed... We were promised this. The Americans did a lot of diplomacy on this. The truth of the matter is

that we have not seen it at all in the south. On the contrary, we've seen it grow more," Martin Griffiths told the Financial Times.

HRW confirms Israel's starvation tactic

A new report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) says Israel has been using starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza.

Omar Shakir, the group's Israel and Palestine director, said there are at least five pieces of evidence that Israel is deliberately starving people in the densely popu-

lated territory.

"One is two-plus months of blocking entry of food and water. The second is the blocking of all but a trickle of humanitarian aid from entering Gaza. This has been documented for more than two months," he told Al Jazeera.

"Then, you add to it some of the additional evidence that we looked at. One is the apparent razing of agricultural lands, large percentages of the green agricultural lands turned brown and desolate."

"Fourth, the report looks

at the intentional destruction of objects necessary for survival — I am talking about the wheat mills, hospitals, water, and sanitation facilities," Shakir said.

"Then, you put together the last piece, which is the statements of the Israeli officials spelling out in clear terms that their strategy or policy is to starve civilians as a tool of leverage to achieve political outcomes," Putting it all together, Shakir added, there is "the clear conclusion that the Israeli government is using starvation as a tool, which

is an abhorrent war crime".

Qatar proposed new prisoner swap deal

Qatar has stepped forward with new proposals to reinstate a prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Hamas as a high-level Qatari delegation has been actively engaging in exploratory discussions with Israeli officials, according to a Palestinian source speaking to the Xinhua news agency. The unannounced meetings, which commenced on December 16 in Norway, are part of Qatar's concert-

ed efforts, in coordination with Egypt, to revive the swap deal between Israel and Hamas.

CIA Director Bill Burns was set to meet Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and the head of Israel's Mossad spy agency in Poland's capital, Warsaw, according to two US and Israeli officials quoted by the Axios news website.

The talks have primarily focused on the exchange of the remaining Israeli captives held by Hamas. In return, Hamas is demanding several days of humanitarian truce in Gaza, coupled with the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli captivity.

This renewed diplomatic push by Qatar comes after three Israeli captives were accidentally killed by the Israeli army in Gaza. This has exponentially increased the pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, especially in Tel Aviv.

The EU's top diplomat said Monday that Israel's military is showing "an appalling lack of distinction" in its targeting in Gaza, highlighting the deaths of Israeli captives, worshippers, and other Palestinian civilians. "This must stop. A humanitarian pause is urgently needed," European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell posted on social media.

Iran gas stations hit by cyberattack: Oil minister

Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji on Monday confirmed that a nationwide disruption to gas stations was caused by a cyberattack.

A hacking group that Iran accuses of having links to Israel claimed it carried out the attack that disrupted services at gas stations across the country on Monday.

Owji had earlier told Iranian national TV that services had been disrupted at about 70% of Iran's gas

stations and that outside interference was a possible cause. He later said 1,650 gas stations were operational. The ministry supervises 3,800 gas stations, Reuters wrote.

Iran's TV news said a group called Gonjeshke Darande or "Predatory Sparrow" had claimed it was behind the disruption. Israeli local media outlets also reported the claim.

Asked about the cyberattacks, Israeli government

spokesperson Tal Heinrich told a press briefing on Monday: "We have nothing to say about Iran's claims."

Iran's civil defence agency, which is responsible for cybersecurity, said it was still considering all possible causes for the disruptions as it investigated.

Iranian media added that the hacker group had in the past claimed cyberattacks against Iranian gas stations, rail networks, and steel factories.

Monday's disruption began early and was especially acute in Tehran, forcing many gas stations to operate manually, Iranian media reported.

Reza Navar, a spokesperson for Iran's gas stations association, told the Fars news agency that there was no fuel supply shortage but called on drivers not to go to gas stations.

"A software problem with the fuel system has been confirmed in some sta-

tions across the country, and experts are currently fixing the issue," Navar said.

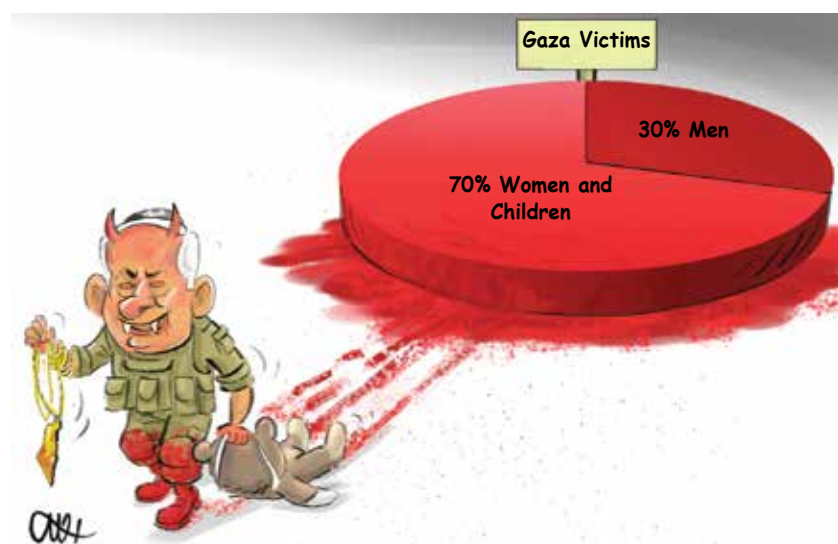
The Oil Ministry earlier told Iranian TV that the disruption was not linked to plans to increase the price of fuel.

National TV said gas stations were seeking to provide fuel manually adding that over 50% of the stations were providing services and trials to get more back online were underway.



People wait at a gas station in Tehran on December 18, 2023, as fuel distribution across 70 percent of Iran's gas stations was disrupted due to a possible sabotage. ATTA KENARE/AFP

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Protracted conflict exacerbating Israel's challenges

By Syed Ali Hassan
Iran Daily's correspondent in Pakistan

PERSPECTIVE

The Israeli military and government are under increasing internal pressure to swiftly achieve their self-imposed objective of eliminating Hamas. Despite sustaining significant losses on the battlefield, it remains uncertain whether the Israeli army has dealt a substantial blow to Hamas. As the conflict persists, Israel's social and political issues are escalating.

Yedioth Ahronoth, in its December 9, 2023 publication,

cited official sources stating that over 5,000 Israeli soldiers have been injured since the onset of the Gaza war. Of these, 2,000 are officially recognized as disabled by the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Daily Yedioth Ahronoth reports approximately 60 new wounded soldiers registering daily in the Israeli army's rehabilitation department. This figure only includes security forces and army reservists, excluding the regular army, suggesting a potentially higher number than indicated by the Israeli government.

The Israeli government has been reticent about the extent of military casualties during

the Gaza offensive. Allegations of a crackdown by Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government against independent Israeli press reporting war facts have also emerged. State media asserts that only 425 soldiers have been killed, with the government aiming to conceal the actual toll to prevent public opposition to the war.

During a meeting with citizens affected by the war, Prime Minister Netanyahu faced adverse reactions from those demanding an immediate halt to the conflict, leading to the suspension of further meetings with war-affected individuals. Israel is not only

contending with resistance in Gaza but also enduring severe attacks from Yemen and Hezbollah, resulting in significant financial losses and casualties. On Friday, a US Defense official reported that Yemen attacked a Liberian-registered cargo ship owned by an Israeli citizen in the Red Sea, causing a fire on the ship's deck. Yemen asserts that a drone successfully targeted a container ship destined for Israel, vowing to continue such actions until Israel ceases the alleged genocide in Gaza. The Yemeni army spokesperson identified the targeted ship as Maersk Gibraltar.

Iranian Khodarahmi wins accolade in Global Music Awards



Behnam Khodarahmi, a musician and composer, wins a bronze medal for his latest composition titled 'Bezan Tar Rhapsody' at the Global Music Awards.

After the announcement of receiving the award, Khodarahmi released the awarded piece, ILNA wrote.

Khodarahmi also took charge of arranging the orchestration for this composition.

The musical arrangement features Amir Ahadi as the soloist on the tar, along with Kousha Sarrafi-Gohar, Payam Toni, Amirhossein Zandian, Milad Aalami, Ali Ja'fari (violin), Kouros Sarrafi-Gohar, Danial Jorabchi (viola), Karim Ghorbani, Davood Monadi (cello), Adel Asgharzadeh (double bass), Saman Ehteshami (piano), Farzad Gheysairpour (timpani), Babak Khajeh-Nouri (tom-bak), Reza Mahini (daf), Hossein Mirzaei (horn), Mohammad Sefi, Elaheh Hamidi, Leila Rezaei, and Mohammad Niknam (choir), all collaborating with Behnam Khodarahmi.

The festival recognized the excellence of 'Bezan Tar Rhapsody' showcasing the collaborative efforts of talented musicians under Khodarahmi's direction.

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Iran's 'Wheel and Desert' wins Best Short Film Award in Kazakhstan

Iranian short film, 'Wheel and Desert,' written and directed by Reza Sabetpour, received the Best Short Film Award at the 11th Bastau International Film Festival in Kazakhstan, held in Almaty from December 12 to 16.

The plot of 'Wheel and Desert' un-

folds on a deserted road in the heart of a desert, portraying the story of a gas station attendant who returns to his station to help an injured man and bring water for him. However, the narrative takes a twist when he discovers that the man is a thief, ILNA

reported.

Additionally, the film is set to be screened in the main competition section of the Jaipur International Film Festival in Rajasthan, India, in January 2024.

The cast of this short film includes

Alireza Mehran, Kambiz Amini, Saeed Taheri, and Keyvan Noqrehkar.

The festival is the largest film festival in Central Asia that aims to develop international cooperation and a cultural exchange between young filmmakers from all over the world.

Al Jazeera employee advocates for Gaza, condemns Israel at Emmy Awards

Yara Elmjouie, an Iranian-American Al Jazeera show host, used his Emmy Awards acceptance speech, during the 50th Annual Daytime Emmy Creative Arts & Lifestyle, to express solidarity with the people of Gaza and condemn Israel for its actions in the conflict.

Elmjouie, who won the Emmy in the Outstanding Lifestyle Program category

for the show 'Eat This With Yara,' took the opportunity to honor his colleagues covering the tragedy in Gaza, Mehr news agency reported.

"I cannot receive this award today without addressing the unfolding tragedy in Gaza and remembering my Al Jazeera colleagues who are risking their lives to cover it," Elmjouie said.

He highlighted the recent loss of cameraman Samer AbuDaqa, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis. Another colleague, Wael al-Dahdouh, was wounded, losing his wife and children in a separate Israeli airstrike.

Al Jazeera has accused Israel of deliberately targeting journalists in the war zone, vowing to urgently refer AbuDaqa's death to

the International Criminal Court. Elmjouie urged continued sharing of stories from those without access to power.

The Committee to Protect Journalists has confirmed that, since the start of the conflict, 64 journalists have been killed, with 57 of them being Palestinian. In a powerful moment during the speech, executive producer Shadi Rahimi

held a sign reading "killing journalists is a war crime," emphasizing the gravity of the situation.

Elmjouie's speech highlighted the human casualties of the conflict, with a plea for international attention and condemnation of Israel's actions.

The event concluded with the audience showing support through applause and gestures of solidarity.

New Notre Dame rooster marks pivotal moment in cathedral's restoration

The installation by a crane of a new golden rooster on Notre Dame, reimagined as a dramatic phoenix with licking, flamed feathers, goes beyond being just a weathervane atop the cathedral spire.

It symbolises resilience amid destruction after the devastating April 2019 fire – as restoration officials also revealed an anti-fire misting system is being kitted out under the cathedral's roof, The Guardian wrote.

Chief architect Philippe Villeneuve, who designed the new rooster, said that the original's survival signified a ray of light in the catastrophe.

Villeneuve elaborated on the new rooster's significance, say-

ing: "Since [the fire] we have worked on this rooster [the] successor, which sees the flame carried to the top of the cathedral as it was before, more than 96 metres from the ground ... It is a fire of resurrection."

In lighthearted comments, the architect said that the process of design was so intense he might have to speak to his therapist about it.

Before ascending to its perch, the rooster – a French emblem of vigilance and Christ's resurrection – was blessed by Paris Archbishop Laurent Ulrich in a square behind the monument. The rooster is an emotive national emblem for the French because of the word's semantics; the Latin word gallus

means both Gaul and rooster. Ulrich placed sacred relics in a hole inside the rooster's breast, including fragments of Christ's Crown of Thorns and remains of St Denis and St Genevieve, infusing the sculpture with religious importance.

The Crown of Thorns, regarded as Notre Dame's most sacred relic, was among the treasures quickly removed after the fire broke out. Brought to Paris by King Louis IX in the 13th century, it is purported to have been pressed on to Christ's head during the crucifixion.

A sealed tube was also placed in the sculpture containing a list of the names of nearly 2,000 individuals who contributed to the cathedral's

reconstruction, underscoring the collective effort behind the works.

Notre Dame's new restoration chief, Philippe Jost, detailed pioneering measures taken to safeguard the cathedral against future fires in comments to the press.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, who last week visited the site to mark a one-year countdown to its reopening, announced that the original rooster will be displayed in a new museum at the Hôtel-Dieu.

This move, along with plans to invite Pope Francis for the cathedral's reopening next year, highlights Notre Dame's significance in French history



and culture. The rooster's installation, crowning a spire reconstructed from Eugène Vio-

llet-le-Duc's 19th-century design, is a poignant reminder of its medieval origins as a symbol of hope and faith.