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Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi (c) and a group of leaders of political parties and political activists pose for a family photo in a meeting in Tehran on January 2, 2024. president.ir

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Gaza fighting rages after Israel warns war will last all year >

Shelling and missile strikes rocked the length of the Gaza Strip overnight into Tuesday, after Israel's army warned its war on Gaza will last through 2024. Despite relentless global demands for a cease-fire, Israel's military spokesman Daniel Hagari said Monday the army was preparing for "prolonged fighting" expected to last "throughout this year".

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EXCLUSIVE

NEWS IN BRIEF

Exchange of goods between Iran, Azerbaijan to grow to 2m tons

With the inauguration of the Astarachay Bridge at the common border between Iran and Azerbaijan, the exchange of goods between the two countries will increase to two million tons, said the CEO of the Iran Construction and Development of Transportation Infrastructures Company.

Talking to IRNA, Kheirollah Khademi said boosting trade with neighboring states is one of the main plans of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

The launch of new roads to these countries can help boost the infrastructures and increase economic exchanges to a great extent, the deputy roads minister maintained.

The Astara region is one of the highly-used transportation roads between the two countries which serves as a gateway of Iran to the Caucasus and European countries and Russia, he stated. Negotiations were held under the framework of the Iran-Azerbaijan Joint Economic Cooperation Commission to increase the transit capacity via the common borders, he said, adding, "It is hoped that the newly-inaugurated Astarachay Bridge will help boost the exchange of goods and transit of passengers."

A new bridge that connects Astara in northwestern Iran to the city of the same name in the southeast of the Republic of Azerbaijan was put into operation at the common border last week.

Petchem industry fetched Iran \$61b in five years: Official

Iran's Association of Petrochemical Industry Corporation (APIC) secretary general said domestic petrochemical industry has fetched \$61 billion over the past five years.

Ahmad Mahdavi Abhari added that some \$50 billion of the earned revenues were deposited into the Integrated Forex Deals System, Shana reported.

Offering a great variety of petrochemicals, Iran is taking the best advantage of its rich hydrocarbon reserves, he underlined.

The petrochemical industry has also supplied 27 million tons of raw materials worth \$26 billion to the downstream sector and 11 million tons of fertilizers to the agricultural sector since 2018, the official noted.

Tehran-Yerevan annual trade tops \$1b: MP

By Ebrahim Beheshti & Reza Abesh Ahmadlou
Staff writers

The annual trade between Iran and Armenia has passed \$1 billion, announced the vice president of the Iran-Armenia Parliamentary Friendship Group, while expressing hope that the figure would increase to \$3 billion in two years.

Talking to Iran Daily, Ara Shaverdian added that with the increase in gas and electricity barter in recent months, the level of trade between the two countries has recently recorded the \$1-billion trade, and in the meetings that Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi had with Armenian officials,

both sides decided to increase their bilateral trade to \$3 billion.

"We hope that with the memorandums of understanding (MoUs) signed between Iran and Armenia in the past few months regarding the infrastructure development of trade, tourism, and the barter of electricity and gas, the process of increasing exchanges will speed up soon."

Referring to Iran as a geopolitical player in the Middle East, Shaverdian said Iran is neighbor to 15 countries, including the Republic of Armenia, sharing a 45-kilometer border with the Caucasian country.

The Iran-Armenia border has great historical and strategic importance, as the

Leader of the Islamic Revolution and Iranian president have already mentioned in their statements, he noted.

Armenia as the northwestern neighbor of Iran is very important in terms of establishing a connection between Iran and the countries of the South Caucasus, the MP added.

Regarding the foreign policies of Iran, Shaverdian said Raisi has made all of his efforts to develop Tehran's ties with regional countries, especially the bordering countries, in such a way that after a few months of the beginning of his job as president about two years ago, we wit-



nessed the improvement of Iran's cooperation with neighboring countries.

With the adoption of such policies by the government,

Iran became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS group. Iran has also become an observer member in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as Armenia is the only EAEU state that shares a land border with Iran.

"We need to strengthen our infrastructure in the field of trade exchanges with other countries, and especially the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) as well as the corri-

dor from India to the Caucasus through Chabahar port, and from there to the Black Sea and the European Union states and Eurasian countries."

The lawmaker expressed hope that the Eurasian countries, including Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, would cooperate with Iran so that the Islamic Republic becomes a permanent member of the EAEU in less than a year.

"In this regard, Iran has taken favorable measures as the second exclusive exhibition on Eurasia was recently held in Tehran which was organized by the Trade Promotion Organization and the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade,"

Shaverdian explained.

Iran is after increasing the volume of exchanges with Eurasian countries, and in this regard, we are looking for using local currencies replacing the US dollar and the euro in trade, which is also on the agenda of the central banks of Iran and Armenia, he said.

Iran is one of the top 10 countries in the field of techno-engineering, Shaverdian noted, adding that the Iranian Parliament supports the export of Iranian technology and services to other countries, as it is trying to pave the ground for Iranian contractors to enter new markets, including Iraq, West African countries as well as the Caucasus region.

Iran-China 11-month trade at \$13.4b

The Chinese Customs announced that trade exchanges between Iran and China stood at more than \$13 billion from January to November 2023, adding that the country's import of products from Iran in November 2023 registered a 24 percent growth compared to the same period last year.

The trade exchanges between the two countries in the 11 months of 2023 was \$13.4 billion, registering a seven percent reduction compared to last year's corresponding period, reported Tasnim news agency.

The two countries' trade surpassed \$14.4 billion from January to November 2022.

China imported \$4.2 billion worth of products from Iran between January and November 2023, showing a 30-percent slump compared to the same period last year. China had imported more than \$6 billion worth of products from Iran between January and November 2022. Crude oil was the main product imported by China from Iran in this period.

China exported \$9.2 billion worth of products to Iran from January to November 2023, showing a nine percent growth compared to last year's corresponding period.

China had exported \$8.4 billion worth of goods to Iran from January to November 2022.

According to the figures, China imported \$405 million worth of products from Iran in November 2023, showing a 24 percent increase compared to November 2022.



OPEC+ starts voluntarily cutting oil production: Report



Several OPEC+ countries, including Saudi Arabia and Russia, have begun voluntarily reducing their oil output by an aggregate additional volume of 2.2 million barrels per day (bpd) in January.

The policy will be in force throughout the first quarter of 2024 (January-March) and, depending on market conditions, the oil producers' cartel may begin progressively returning reduced volumes to the market.

Following the November 30 OPEC+ summit, the member countries of the cartel decided on additional voluntary cuts in oil output to achieve a balance in the global market, according to TASS.

Thus, Saudi Arabia will reduce output by one million barrels of oil per day (bpd) until the end of March 2024, while Russia will deepen its reduction in oil deliveries to world markets from 300,000 bpd to 500,000 bpd.

Other OPEC+ countries will lower production by a total of nearly 700,000 bpd, including Iraq (by 223,000 bpd), the United Arab Emirates (by 163,000 bpd), Kuwait (by 135,000 bpd), Kazakhstan (by 82,000 bpd), Algeria (by 51,000 bpd) and Oman (by 42,000 bpd).

These cuts are not part of the OPEC+ agreement and remain optional, the report added.

Given that Saudi Arabia is extending production cuts already in effect since July 2023 and is not deepening them, and that Russia is cutting its already reduced supply volumes by another 200,000 bpd, the volume of new cuts for the market will reach only 896,000 bpd.

Narcissus flower cultivation in Mazandaran Province is opportunity for growth



● HAVVA AHMADI/MEHR

Iranica Desk

The delightful scent of narcissus, also known as the flower of the cold season, is currently filling the air in various cities across Mazandaran Province. The cultivation of this beautiful and fragrant flower has experienced a significant increase in recent years, with its cultivation area expanding annually.

It is a traditional view that products like narcissus can only be sold in street markets and flower shops and do not contribute to job creation or income. This mindset has hindered the development of agricultural and horticultural products in Mazandaran Province for years, preventing valuable opportunities from reaching their full potential in the regional economy, IRNA wrote. The recent Narcissus Flower Festi-

val in Kord Kola village of Juybar received a positive response from the public and officials. Producers displayed and sold bunches of narcissi at the festival, attracting both flower enthusiasts and those interested in purchasing narcissus bulbs. However, the lack of processing industries and potential products derived from this flower was also apparent.

Governor of Mazandaran, Seyyed Mahmoud Hosseini Pour, emphasized the need for producers to establish cooperative units and collaborate more closely with the Ministry of Agriculture. This would create opportunities for state support in the areas of export, marketing, and processing, enabling the industry to thrive. The city of Juybar serves as the main hub for narcissus production and has been hosting the Narcissus Festival for several years. It boasts the largest area under narcissus cultivation in the province, with approximately 66 hectares out of 100 hectares of narcissus gardens in Mazandaran. Babak Momeni, the head of the Agricultural Organization of Mazandaran Province, highlighted the significance of narcissus production for the economy of

Mazandaran Province from two perspectives. He believes that, on one hand, the narcissus flower has the potential to generate income and boost the region's economy; on the other hand, the novelty of this activity presents a suitable opportunity for targeted development and direction. Momeni also referred to the challenges in such production opportunities in Mazandaran Province, stating that the process involves cultivation followed by marketing, and in the best-case scenario, the product is sold on the streets and in flower shops. However, a sudden price drop often occurs after a while, leading to the product being forgotten until the next year. Discussing ways to make the economy of narcissus cultivation in Mazandaran Province flourish, he emphasized the importance of farmers considering producing narcissus flowers. He highlighted the potential for increasing agricultural income by integrating the production of narcissus flower bulbs into the crop rotation of rice and wheat, provided that the process is handled correctly.



Abyaneh village: Red emerald of Iran in the heart of Isfahan Province



● behrouzgasht.com



● visitiran.ir



● iranwonders.com

Situated at an elevation of approximately 2,300 meters to 2,700 meters above sea level, nestled on a mountain, is the magnificent castle of Abyaneh village. This village, located in Isfahan Province, is a respectable neighbor of Kashan and is known for its unique red-stepped homes and mud-brick lanes. It is truly a sight to behold and leaves a lasting impression on anyone who visits.

Abyaneh village holds a special place in the hearts of Iranians, as it is considered a must-see destination in all of Iran. The village is often referred to as

'the red emerald of Iran,' thanks to its stunning reddish hues that adorn every corner. Walking through the village feels like stepping back in time, with its old homes, elderly residents, and vibrant gardens that are bursting with colors amidst the desert backdrop.

The architecture of Abyaneh village is a true testament to its rich history. The red clay homes, mud-brick buildings and mosque create a mesmerizing blend of past and present. To delve deeper into the village's heritage, a visit to the Abyaneh Anthropology Mu-

seum is highly recommended. Here, traditional items, attire, textiles, and weaving equipment are showcased, providing valuable insights into the local culture.

One of the highlights of visiting Abyaneh village is interacting with the friendly locals. As you stroll through the picturesque town, you will come across warm greetings from the villagers, dressed in their traditional garb, who often sell their products. Their dedication to preserving customs and language, which still contains words from the Parthian era,

is truly remarkable. However, it is always polite to seek their permission before taking photographs.

In addition to immersing yourself in the village's charm, there are several activities to enhance your visit. Explore the historic fire temple, Harpaak, known for its architectural style. Make sure to visit the Jaame (Grand) Mosque, which dates back to the eleventh century and boasts a magnificent walnut wood-carved *mihrab* adorned with floral patterns and calligraphy. A leisurely stroll to the opposite bank of the river be-

neath the village offers breathtaking views of the homes and landscape.

Abyaneh village welcomes visitors throughout the year due to its temperate climate. However, spring, especially the month of May, is considered the best time to visit. The scenery is breathtaking, and you can witness the Rosewater Festival held in Kashan, which is renowned for its souvenirs. The air is fresh and cool during this season, making it even more enjoyable to explore the village.

Located on the northwest slopes of the Karkas Mountains,

Abyaneh village is conveniently located along Iran's traditional tourist route. Its proximity and accessibility make it an ideal destination for a half- or full-day visit. The village's architecture, ethereal beauty, and welcoming community make it an unforgettable experience for travelers from around the world.

As you embark on your journey through Abyaneh village, be prepared to be captivated by its rich history, stunning architecture, warm hospitality, and the magical dance of colors that bring this ancient village to life.

Commander's legacy

Gen. Soleimani was assassinated, yet his legacy remains unobstructed



By Ebrahim Beheshti
Staff writer

"Was America's assassination of Qassem Soleimani justified?" this was a question raised by the renowned magazine "The Economist" on January 7, 2020, four days after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani,

the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), in Baghdad airport by the US military under the direct order of then president Donald Trump. Now, on the fourth anniversary of the assassination, this question remains still relevant if the assassination was justified.

The US government and Trump, at the time, had found several justifi-

cations for the assassination, which faced criticism even among Americans. However, it appears that behind these justifications, which portrayed Soleimani as a threat to the US interests, a larger strategic goal was concealed - influencing Iran's policy in guiding and supporting the Resistance Front.

The Resistance Front comprises states, organizations, and military

or militia groups in the West Asia region, united against foreign intervention, particularly by the US, and opposing the occupation policies of Israel. The Resistance Front also has a track record of combating and defeating the ISIS terrorist group. Iran, Iraq, and Syria, along with the Ansarullah movement (Houthis) in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, militia groups in Iraq (Hashd al-Shaabi, Kata'ib Hizbal-

lah, etc.), and Palestinian resistance groups (Hamas and the Islamic Jihad), form various components of the Resistance Front.

The US, Israel, along with some regional states allied with Washington, see Iran, the Quds Force of the IRGC, and the assassinated Gen. Soleimani as the key factor in the formation and strengthening of the Resistance Front.

Honored enemy

Gen. Soleimani, a respected figure and a commander of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, was appointed as the commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC in 1997. Until his assassination on January 3, 2020, outside the Baghdad airport, he played a crucial role in various regional events, such as developments

in Afghanistan, providing support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, establishing the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and participating in the fight against ISIS in Syria. His capabilities and accomplishments were acknowledged even by his adversaries. Former US president Barack Obama

had told ex-Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi in 2014 that "he is my enemy but I have a special respect for him."

In an interview on CBS News "Face the Nation" on Jan. 6, 2020, David Petraeus, a former American army general and director of the CIA General Petraeus, considered Soleimani a "very capable" ad-

versary during his time commanding troops in Iraq.

For four years now, the commander is no longer alive, but the desired goal of the United States and Israel, which is to change Iran's policies, has failed and even made the Resistance Front more powerful than before.

Fulfilled promise

Following the assassination of Gen. Soleimani, the leaders of the Resistance Front pledged an increase in both power and popularity for the front. Despite this assurance, the misguided officials in the White House overlooked it in their evaluations.

On the occasion of Gen. Soleimani's assassination, Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei stated in a message that with his martyrdom, his work and path will not stop; it will continue with even greater motivation. All friends, as well as all enemies, should know that the line of resistance will continue with doubled enthusiasm.

Adel Abdul-Mahdi, the former prime minister of Iraq, whom Soleimani was heading to meet from Syria before being targeted, stated in an interview with Fars News Agency, "They anticipated that by eliminating him, they would resolve his matters, but, in reality, they only fueled his cause and strengthened the influence he held."

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also stated in part of his condolence message: "We have no doubt that the path of Gen. Soleimani and his comrades will become more rooted in the minds of the youth of the resistance after his martyrdom."

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader

of Lebanon's Hezbollah, had also said, "We will continue his path and strive day and night for the realization of his goals, waving his flag in all arenas and fronts."

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, addressing the funeral ceremony for Gen. Soleimani in Tehran, stated, "I declare that the path of resistance in the land of Palestine will continue, will not weaken, and will not retreat. These assassinations and martyrdoms will add to our will, stability, and perseverance."

Previous US administrations under Obama and Bush seem to have taken into account the potential consequences of the assassination of Gen.

Soleimani. Reports in the US media following Soleimani's targeted killing indicated that the plan to assassinate him had been discussed earlier but had never been put into action.

In a January 2020 report by The Associated Press, Elissa Blair Slotkin, an American politician and Democratic representative, along with a Middle East analyst at the CIA, stated that both the Bush and Obama administrations had determined that assassinating Soleimani was not a suitable means to accomplish US ultimate objectives.

Iran's policy remains unchanged

Under the presidency of Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, hardliners in the US administration seemed incapable of grasping such consequences. Although, at the same time, there were analysts and diplomats who did not see this terrorist act as conducive to achieving the US' goals.

Nabeel Khoury, with 25 years in the US Foreign Service, including roles as Deputy Chief of Mission in Sana'a and Director of Analysis for the Middle East, responded to Thomas Friedman, a foreign policy writer and analyst, on January 15, 2019, stating that they targeted a high-ranking official for assassination, believing that eliminating him would improve the situation.

The first issue is that Qassem Soleimani was a very important figure, but even removing someone of his importance does not really bring about a change in the situation, he said. Iran is highly organized. Immediately after Soleimani's death, they introduced his successor: Iran has a good number of individuals capable of managing this organization [Quds Force of the IRGC]. The main question is, what was your goal? If your goal was to change and reform Iran's behavior, by killing Soleimani, you've exactly done the opposite.

The Economist, on January 7, 2020, a few days after Soleimani's assassination, addressed the policy of killing opponents by the US in an extensive article, empha-

sizing that the US follows Israel in this matter. A section of the article, raising the question of whether "America's assassination of Soleimani was justified", stated that the reality is that many assassinations ultimately bring about unpredictable and dire consequences.

The article on Soleimani's assassination stated that his actions in the region have led to the creation of networks of resistance that will not dissolve with the removal of Soleimani. This network continues its work with the same former capacity even after his death.

This article considered the assassination of General Soleimani at an international airport in a third country (Iraq) as a violation of that country's sovereignty,

stating that as a result, if the Iraqi people also expel Americans, the assassination of General Soleimani has indeed yielded the exact results he anticipated.

The author's prediction about the expulsion of Americans from Iraq had indeed materialized shortly before the publication of this issue of The Economist. On January 5, two days after the martyrdom of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi, the Iraqi Parliament held an emergency session to investigate the violation of Iraq's sovereignty in the US drone attack at Baghdad International Airport. In this session, the resolution for the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Iraq was passed.

Resistance: A strengthened tree

Today, the promises of the leaders of the Resistance Front and the predictions of many analysts and diplomats, who remained distant from the views of the former US officials, have come true. The Resistance Front is more powerful than ever on the scene.

Israel, backed by the United States, has been targeting Gaza with ground and aerial attacks for over three months, yet it has been unsuccessful in destroying Hamas, which is just one of the organizations within the

Resistance Front.

The direct entry of Lebanon's Hezbollah into a war with Israel has been a cause for concern for Israel and the United States for several months. Yemen's Ansarullah has disrupted the transit route of goods to Israel in the Red Sea and has become a serious challenge to the United States.

A bit further from the battlefield, also in the diplomatic arena, the resistance stands tall. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has stood strong against the desires of Israel, the Unit-

ed States and its regional allies. The Arab League, with embarrassment for its previous hostile policies, has welcomed Syria. The Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the United States, after seven years of war with Houthis in Yemen without achieving success, is preparing for peace talks with the resistance group.

Riyadh has also revived diplomatic relations with Tehran by changing its regional policies. Iraq is gradually moving away from US influence

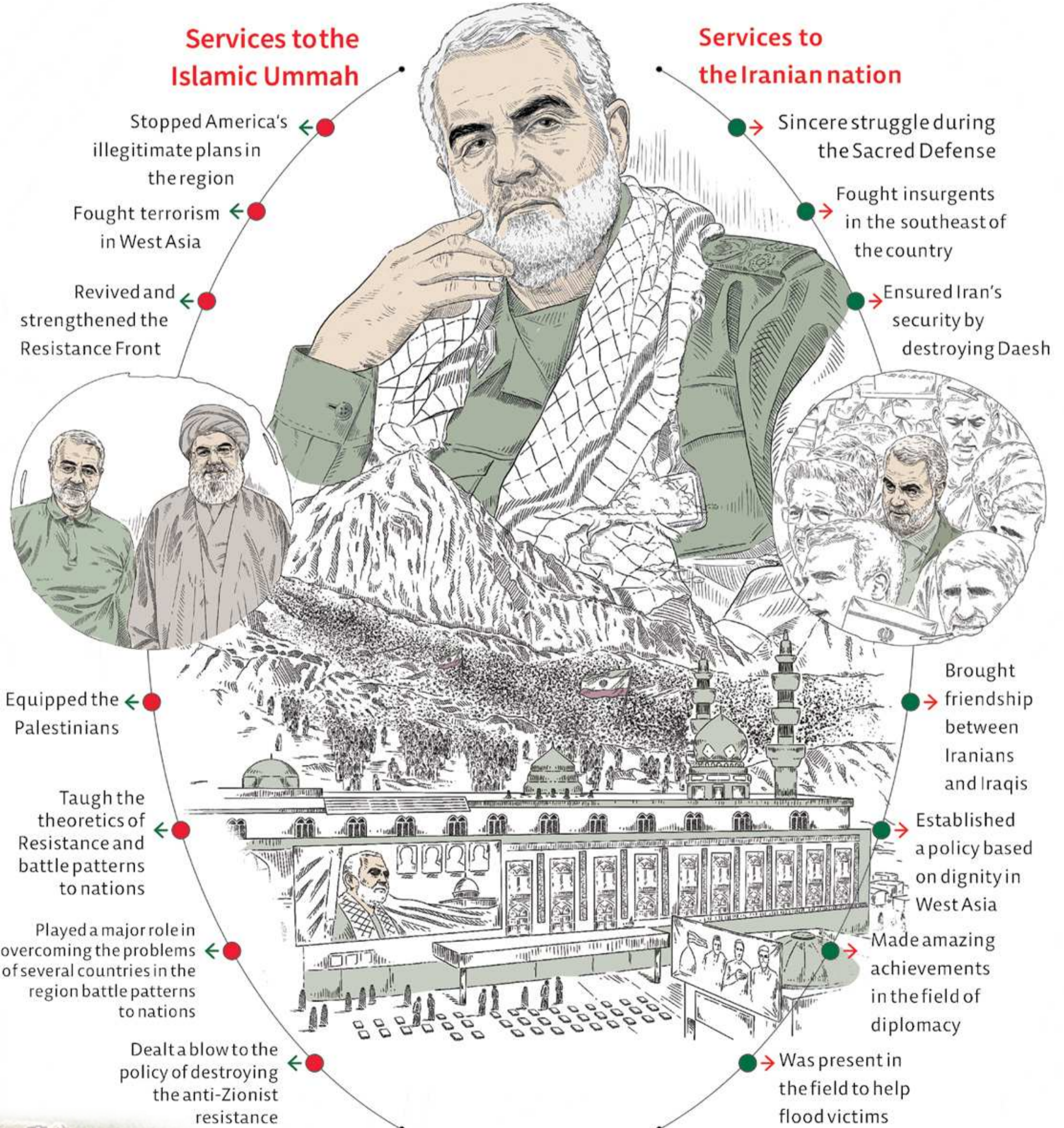
and control, and ultimately, the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy in supporting the resistance front has not changed. The resistance was a sapling that turned into a sturdy tree with Qassem Soleimani and has now become even more robust after his martyrdom. The path of the commander was not blocked after his martyrdom. Now, perhaps it is easier to answer the question "Was the assassination of Soleimani beneficial for the United States?"



Martyr Soleimani's extensive services to the Islamic Ummah and Iranian nation

Reviver of the Resistance

Just days before the fourth anniversary of Martyr Soleimani's assassination, Imam Khamenei emphasized that the Resistance in Gaza has been able to resist for nearly three months due to the existence of the Resistance Front. The Leader of the Islamic Revolution said, "Martyr Soleimani's most significant role was to revive the Resistance Front in the region. Martyr Soleimani's "extensive services to the Islamic Ummah and Iranian nation" have been summarized in this infographic based on the statements of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution.



Having sights set on Olympic triumph, Zare' will be the Iranian athlete to watch in 2024



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

Heading into 2024, Amirhossein Zare' will be looking to build on an impressive three years in his career – most notably a dominant performance over the past 12 months – when beginning preparations for the biggest sporting prize of all: A gold medal at the Paris Olympics.

All eyes will be on the freestyle wrestler in the Iranian delegation for next summer's event, after he reclaimed the super-heavyweight crown in September's World Championships in Belgrade before easing to the top podium at the Asian Games three weeks later.

"I will give my full dedication to the success in Paris right from tomorrow, when I wake up in my hotel room," Zare' said after he walked off the mat for the last time in Belgrade.

At the age of 22, Zare' is already among the most decorated Iranian wrestlers over the past decade, courtesy of double world golds and a bronze, as well as the Olympic bronze in Tokyo in 2021. The victory over Mongolian Mönkhörtiin Lkhagvagerelgold – world runner-up in 2022 – in the Hangzhou final rounded off a 13-bout winning streak in 2023 for Zare', including a last-four win against Turkish sensation Taha Akgül at the World Championships, followed by an 11-0 demolishing of Georgian Geno Petriashvili in the final.

Zare's second world final victory over the Georgian giant in three years was one of the seven wins



UWW

that the Iranian sealed before the six-minute mark over the course of 12 months.

The Iranian tallied 115 points in three major international outings – starting with the Zagreb Open triumph in January – while conceding only eight points against his opponents.

In fact, Daniel Ligeti of Hungary and Belarusian Dzianis Khramiankou were the only wres-

tlers to take points from the Iranian in 2023.

Zare', Petriashvili, and Akgül will again be involved in a three-horse race for the ultimate prize in Paris, unless American Gable Steveson, who embarked on a career as a professional wrestler after winning the gold in Tokyo, makes a surprise return for the competition.

Zare' is all but guaranteed a

place in the country's Olympic squad but he will still have to see off fellow Iranian prodigy Amir-Reza Ma'soumi – a world gold medalist in all age groups, who threw down the gauntlet to Zare' by dominating December's National Championships.

The two are tipped to go head-to-head when representing the country at the UWW Ranking Series in Zagreb.

For all the illustrious wrestling history Iran has enjoyed in the Olympics since collecting five medals in Helsinki 1952 – including double silvers for Nasser Givhechi and legendary Gholamreza Takhti – a superheavyweight gold has been eluding the country over the past 29 editions of the multi-sport event, and the occasion in July and August could see Zare' and Amin Mirzazadeh –

world Greco-Roman champion in Belgrade – break that duck.

Retired wrestler Komeil Qassemi has an Olympic gold in the weight class under his belt, but he was only handed the ultimate prize of the freestyle 120kg category a decade after London 2012, thanks to positive doping test results for the initial top two Artur Taymazov and Davit Modzmanashvili.

VNL 2024:

Volleyball heavyweights standing between Iran and Olympic spot



FIVB

Sports Desk

Iran will take one last shot at a place at next summer's Paris Olympics when getting its Volleyball Nations League campaign underway against reigning world champion Italy in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on May 21. With Germany, Brazil, Poland, Canada, USA, and Japan having already punched their tickets for the French capital – thanks to a top-two finish across the three pools in last October's qualification tournament – the four remaining spots for the Games will be decided through the FIVB Men's World Ranking by the end of the VNL preliminary round. Egypt is likely to take the African slot and, as it stands in the ranking, Italy (third), Argentina (sixth), Slovenia (seventh), and Serbia (ninth) are also the favorites to qualify, with Iran lagging behind in the 15th place.

The Asian powerhouse will then take on Argentina, Serbia, and Cuba in Week 1 of the annual event, before heading to the Japanese city of Chiba for the second week of action – starting June 4 – against Japan, Brazil, newcomer Turkey, and Bulgaria.

Week 3 will see Iran square off against the Netherlands, Germany, France before finish the preliminary round against the USA on June 23 in Manila, the Philippines.

The top seven of the 16-team table of the preliminary phase will join host Poland in the VNL Finals in Lodz from June 27-30.

The Iranian Volleyball Federation is yet to name the new head coach for the national team following Behrouz Ataie's departure in the aftermath of four-set defeat against the Czech Republic midway through the Olympic qualification tournament in midway through the FIVB Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Rio de Janeiro in October.

The national governing body of the sport announced a four-man shortlist for the job last week. Former Iran skipper Saeed Ma'rouf and Belgian Vital Heynen – world champion with Poland in 2014 – plus Italian duo Angelo Lorenzetti and Roberto Piazza, now in charge of clubs Sir Sicoma Perugia and Allianz Milano in their home country respectively, are in contention for the role.

Azmoun given go-ahead by Roma for Asian Cup



FABIO ROSSI/GETTY IMAGES

Sports Desk

Serie A club AS Roma gave Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun the green light to feature in the upcoming AFC Asian Cup – starting January 12 in Qatar.

The Iranian Football Federation said on Sunday that the prolific frontman could miss out on the continent's flagship international event due to a clause in his one-year loan contract from Leverkusen with the Italian side.

However, the Iranian federation, announcing the 26-man squad for the tournament on Tuesday, said the Giallorossi's sporting director Tiago Pinto was convinced to release the Iranian after next Sunday's top-flight game against Atalanta, as he will join up with his teammates in Doha on January 10 – four days before Iran's

Group C opener against Palestine. Sepahan prodigy Mohammad-Javad Hosseinnejad – named in the provisional squad on Sunday – was omitted from the list, while Mahdi Qayedi, whose last international appearance came in the CAFA Nations Cup final against Uzbekistan in June, kept his place in the squad following an impressive run of late with Farhad Majidi's Ittihad Kalba in the UAE Pro League. Chasing a first Asian Cup title since lifting the trophy on home soil in 1976, the three-time champion Iran will take on Hong Kong in its second game in the group in Al Rayyan's Khalifa International Stadium on Jan. 19. The final round of the group fixtures will see Amir Qalenoee's side face the United Arab Emirates at the Education City Stadium on January 23.

Raisi: Various political factions welcomed in Parl.



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (c) holds a meeting with a group of leaders of political parties and political activists in Tehran on January 2, 2024. president.ir

Iran has asked Iraq to extradite 38 separatists: Top rights official



Iran's top human rights official said the Islamic Republic has called upon Iraqi authorities to extradite 38 main members of separatist and terrorist groups holed up in the Arab country's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region. Kazem Gharibabadi, secretary of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, made the remarks on the sidelines of the fourth trial session of the members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) terrorist group, which was held in absentia in the capital Tehran on Tuesday, Press TV reported.

Iran has urged the central government in Iraq and authorities in Kurdistan to meet their commitments toward Iran and take necessary measures to secure the border.

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has launched several rounds of airstrikes against the positions of the terrorists who are holed up in Iraqi Kurdistan.

On November 21, 2022, positions of anti-Iran separatist and terrorist groups in northern Iraq came under combined attacks using missiles and kamikaze drones. The strikes targeted the positions of the notorious Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and the Komala Party in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran's Arabic-language Al-Alam television news network reported at the time.

According to the network, one attack saw four missiles being fired against a PDKI position in the town of Koy Sanjaq in Erbil Province. A separate attack featured kamikaze drones smashing into another site belonging to the group near the Baharka village.

Simultaneously, kamikaze drones struck positions associated with Komala across two locations near the city of Sulaymaniyah. Elsewhere in his remarks on Tuesday, Gharibabadi noted that Iran has not limited its legal actions simply to MKO terrorists, but has also taken measures against Pakistan-based so-called Ansar-ul-Furqan and Jaish-ul-Adl terrorist groups.

Members of the latter terrorist outfit are wanted for a vicious terrorist assault on Rask County's police headquarters in the south-eastern Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan on December 15 last year.

The assault claimed the lives of 11 police forces, including officers and conscripts, and left several others wounded.

National Desk

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said on Tuesday that the government welcomes the presence of different political inclinations in Parliament as a platform for the formation of a strong legislature. He made the remarks in a meeting with a group of leaders of political parties and political activists ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections on March 1.

Not only is the government not worried about the presence of different political inclinations in Parliament, but it considers it a platform for the formation of a strong Parliament that can increase the power and authority of the country, Raisi said.

He said that holding such meetings is aimed at increasing the participation of people in the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. The president added that these meetings are effective in strengthening synergy between different political factions and social and influential figures in improving the electoral atmosphere in the society.

Raisi also referred to recent remarks by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei who said that the most important task of all political activists, government, political parties and figures is to create and promote hope and vitality in the society. Ayatollah Khamenei has also said scholars, university professors, seminary

instructors, radio and television journalists, young people and people within their families have a duty to invite others to participate in the elections. Referring to importance of the role of political factions in resolving the country's problems, President Raisi underlined that everyone has an obligation to work to resolve the country's problems

irrespective of who has created them. He also pointed to the impact of the country's economic problems on participation in the elections, saying that a lot of measures have been taken since the country's revolution in 1979 in improvement of the livelihood of people, but more efforts need to be made in this field.

Gaza fighting rages after Israel warns war will last all year

Shelling and missile strikes rocked the length of the Gaza Strip overnight into Tuesday, after Israel's army warned its war on Gaza will last through 2024. Despite relentless global demands for a cease-fire, Israel's military spokesman Daniel Hagari said Monday the army was preparing for "prolonged

fighting" expected to last "throughout this year". On Monday night into Tuesday morning, eyewitnesses reported missiles fired towards the city of Rafah in the south and shelling around the Jabalia refugee camp in the north, AFP reported. Fighting was also reported around the central areas of Maghazi and Bureij, as well

as the main southern city of Khan Yunis. In Gaza, where UN agencies have voiced alarm over a spiraling humanitarian crisis, 2.4 million Palestinians remained under siege and bombardment, most of them displaced and many huddling in shelters and tents amid dire food shortages. "Living conditions...



are just hopeless," said 43-year-old Mostafa Shenar, who fled Gaza City, now a largely devastated urban combat zone, and has been living in the crowded southern border town of Rafah.

street protests last year against what is considered the most right-wing cabinet in Israeli history.

Political blow to Netanyahu

The Supreme Court overruled a key plank of a judicial reform package that Netanyahu has defended as rebalancing the powers of politicians and judges, but which protesters have labelled a threat to Israel's liberal democracy.

The setback on the so-called reasonableness clause dealt a political blow to the wartime cabinet already under fire over the intelligence failure leading up to October 7.

The army said Monday it would soon rotate out some of the more than 300,000 reservists called up after October 7, in part to prepare them for many more months of war ahead.

It said reservists from two brigades, which have some 4,000 troops each, will start returning home this week.

Deadly West Bank clashes

Violence has also surged in the occupied West Bank, where at least 321 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli troops and settlers since the Gaza war began, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian health ministry.

In the latest clash Tuesday, Israeli forces killed four Palestinians, the ministry said. Recent months have also seen almost daily exchanges of fire on the Lebanon border between the Israeli army and Hezbollah resistance movement in Lebanon.

Israel has also hit targets in Syria and launched strikes near Damascus overnight causing "some material damage", state news agency SANA reported.

Yemen's Ansarullah movement have also launched attacks at Israel and at cargo ships in the Red Sea, where the US military has assembled a multinational taskforce to protect the vital shipping lane.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Iranian antiquities to be showcased in China for one year

ILNA – The 'Grandeur of Iran' exhibition, featuring a diverse collection of historical and Islamic ancient artifacts, including the golden goblet, Sasanian silver plates, and pieces from the Persepolis, will be displayed in various museums across China for a year.

Hadi Mirzaei, the director general of the General Office of Museums in the Iranian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, announced the show, stating that the exhibition will begin on January 11, 2024, at the Forbidden City Palace Museum in Beijing.

Mirzaei disclosed that the exhibition will showcase 211 cultural artifacts from different historical and Islamic periods in Iran, along with five reconstructed pieces from selected items in the National Museum of Iran, Golestan Province, Gilan Province, and Fars Province.

Following evaluation by the ministry's high expert committee, the selected items received temporary export approval after signing contracts with the host museum. The artifacts were then carefully packaged and prepared for transportation under the supervision of conservation and restoration experts.

Mirzaei added that starting from January 12, 2025, the exhibition will travel to various museums in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Xi'an, and Urumqi, concluding its one-year journey on January 12, 2025.

Plus, an agreement has been reached for a reciprocal exhibition of selected Chinese cultural and civilizational works in the National Museum of Iran after the conclusion of the Iranian exhibition.

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Soheil Rafiei depicting theatrical exploration of human anger and evolution



Mahdieh Qazvinian
Staff writer

Iran's young playwright Soheil Rafiei, the creative mind behind the innovative play 'Jahesh Yakhteh', (literally meaning 'reaching to a higher level') explained his unique approach to storytelling and the underlying questions that led to his latest dramatic production. The play draws inspiration from the biblical tale of Adam and Eve, exploring the repercussions of consuming the forbidden fruit. The narrative unfolds in a world where particles and elements discuss the lasting impact of human existence. Rafiei raises the critical question, "What happens when anything deviates from its original form?" In an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Rafiei expressed his motivation behind the play, stating, "If there is an issue plaguing the world today, it is human anger. The excessive brutality beyond human limits leads to the question: What could be the cause? It led me back to the early days of humanity, where anger was

sparked by the consumption of a simple apple, perhaps intensifying with each passing day."

The play, which runs from December 26 to January 2 at Arghavan Hall in Tehran, features four main characters representing different aspects of the narrative: The first character is a human embryo refusing living and evolving; the second is Jesus' love for God; the third is Beethoven's symphony notes, and the last character is an unnamed Embryo evolving into a quasi-human.

Rafiei elaborates on the play's title, stating that it revolves around a character named "human embryo", representing the evolution from a fetus to a quasi-human, a higher stage in the hierarchy. The play explores the concept of transformation and ascension to a higher state.

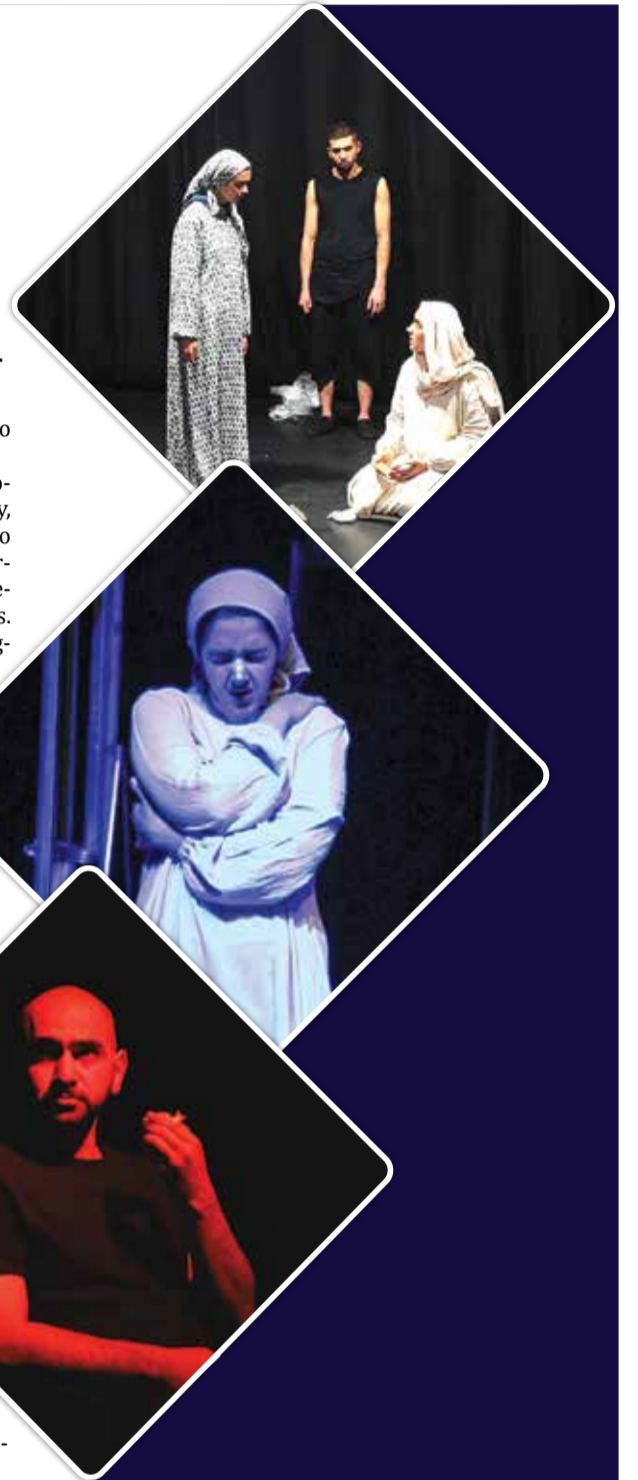
A member of the audience described a particularly impactful scene where the character of Jesus' love reflects on the crucifixion, portraying the resilience of faith in the face of ignorance and superstition. The mythological tale unfolds as the sun and moon converge,

symbolizing the reaction to the death of Jesus.

Rafiei emphasizes the profound message of the play, showcasing Jesus' ability to transcend pain and suffering through grace, ultimately soaring into the heavens. Rafiei, one of Iran's youngest theater directors, believes that art should serve as a mirror to society.

He emphasizes that his artistic expression is not merely entertainment but a reflection of the world he observes. The artwork addresses the widespread issue of anger in today's youth, encouraging the audience to control

their anger before it controls them. Despite lacking formal academic credentials, Rafiei improved his skills under the guidance of various directors.



Despite 29% growth, 2023 cinema could not return to pre-pandemic era



Despite a notable 29% growth in box office revenue compared to 2022, the 2023 cinema struggled to return to the pre-COVID era, causing concerns about this year's screenings and their financial outcomes, according to industry observers. In a year marked by a final box office tally of \$33.4 billion, 2023 cinema

faced challenges in matching the pre-pandemic figures of \$42.3 billion from 2019. Several analytical firms predict that 2024 may bring further worries, indicating a need for a 26% increase in sales to reach pre-COVID levels. Key factors contributing to the challenges include a wide scale strike by screenwriters and

actors, impacting not only North American revenues but also global cinema figures. This strike, coupled with the significant success of two major releases – 'Oppenheimer' and 'Barbie' – created a dramatic change in the industry. The widespread impact of the strike extended beyond the North American market, affecting

both large and small international film festivals. It disrupted the natural evaluation of films' true worth at the box office and prompted delays in the release of certain films.

The success of 'Oppenheimer' and 'Barbie' rapidly propelled these films to global fame, collectively grossing \$2.4 billion, contributing to over 7% of the total sales for the year. This success, however, may be viewed as an exception, as 2024 is unlikely to witness a lineup of blockbuster films and renowned directors comparable to 2023.

Despite the challenges, certain genres such as animation, horror, and action films gained popularity, garnering high audience satisfaction and positive reviews. However, with fewer crowd-pleasing films scheduled for 2024, concerns about the sus-

tainability of cinema's return to its pre-COVID glory persist.

The loss of several prominent filmmakers in 2023, including William Friedkin, Alan Arkin, Ron Cephas Jones, Angus Cloud, Matthew Perry, Ryan O'Neal, and Michael Gambon, further underscored the challenges faced by the industry.

While 2023 witnessed a significant growth in post-pandemic box office numbers and showcased high-quality productions, the issues of discrimination and consumerism within the film industry continue to impede the long-awaited return to stability and tranquility along the cinematic shore. The impacts of these issues are expected to extend into 2024, potentially reshaping the global cinema landscape and influencing its intrinsic value.

Iran's 'Sampo' to be screened in Bulgaria's festival

ISNA – Marzieh Riahi's Iranian short film, 'Sampo', is set to represent Iran at the 16th Sofia MENAR Film Festival in Bulgaria.

The festival, showcasing cinema from the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa, is scheduled to take place from January 12 to January 28.

The 14-minute film, revolves around a mother involved in arranging funerals and parties, while her daughter holds a different perspective on her mother's profession. The cast includes Linda Kiani, Maryam Boubani, Hilda Kordbache, and Hannan Azizi.

The short film has already been showcased at international events, including the Nickel Independent Film Festival in Canada, the Port Townsend Film Festival in the US, and the prestigious Palm Beach International Film Festival in the US.

Sofia MENAR Film Festival, initiated in 2009 and held annually in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, is recognized as one of the prominent cultural events in the Balkans, featuring the best cinematic works from the specified regions.

