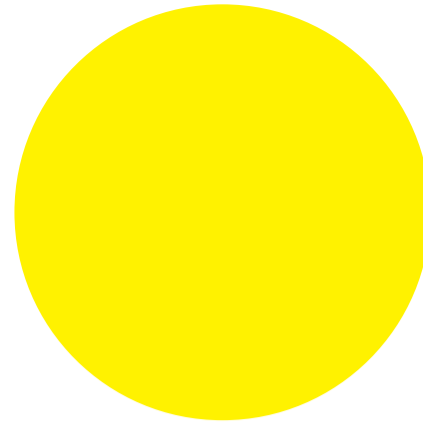


42nd Fajr International Film Festival opens in Tehran

The 42nd Fajr International Film Festival kicked off on February 1, 2024, featuring 621 submissions from 87 countries. The International Section includes Cinema Salvation, Films from Asian-Islamic Countries, and Festival of Festivals. In the National Section, 37 movies will compete in Sodaye-Simorgh, New Perspective, and Animations categories. The festival's curtains will come down on February 11 and the winners will be announced the same day.



Iran Daily



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Cultural theology of Al-Aqsa Storm

Western decline, rise of Resistance: Five new trends in global fundamental changes



By **Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili**
Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

The question that is currently being discussed among scholars and intellectuals, both in academic and religious circles, is: How does global cultural theology understand the issue of the Al-Aqsa storm, and how does it reconcile it with religious identities such as Muslim, Christian, Jewish, etc.?

I aim to reframe this problem and state that the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm itself carries a new "cultural theology" born at a historical moment: during a period of cultural recession in the globalized Western world. Precisely at a time when a reversal of cultural trends from secular American-European cultures is at its peak, indicating the rise of "spiritual cultures." In the era of the "Western recession," the Operation-Al-Aqsa storm has globally presented the values of cultural resistance, and we need to strive to contextualize its "cultural theology."

Conscience shaming world

The Operation Al-Aqsa storm, with its military initiation, holds a cultural and Islamic essence. It has propelled the world into a new phase of "ethical reconsideration" and "international shame" regarding the global policies of the West. The basis and meaning of this ethical reconsideration cannot be understood outside the realm of religious teachings and theological concepts. This shaming and redirection have long been guided by the leadership of Imam Khomeini and the wise leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei, and its results can be observed today in various levels of global political and cultural geography.

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Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (2nd L) visits the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' naval base in southern city of Bandar Abbas on February 2, 2024. [president.ir](#)

Raisi: Iran Will 'Respond Firmly' to Any Attack

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SPECIAL ISSUE



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NEWS IN BRIEF

Raisi:

Downstream industry, value chain completion to increase value added

Iran's President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi said on Thursday the completion of downstream industry and value chain enhances raw materials with added value. Addressing a ceremony to start the operation of 157 oil and energy projects during his second visit to the southern province of Hormuzgan, the president said the country sustains a major loss by selling raw materials, Shana reported. Raisi pointed to a nuclear power plant megaproject in Sirik announced by the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) head, describing the 5,000 MW plant establishment as important to the country's economy and progress. The launch of these plants helps the country take a large step toward promoting economic independence, he underlined.

Establishing joint free trade zone with Turkey will prevent smuggling: MP

Iranian lawmaker Rahim Zare said that an agreement between Iran and Turkey to establish a free trade zone will help prevent smuggling of goods and boost bilateral trade.

Zare, who is a member of the Iranian Parliament's Budget and Plan Committee, was referring to the agreement which Iran and Turkey reached during last week trip of President Ebrahim Raisi to Ankara where he and his Turkish counterpart agreed to expand bilateral cooperation in other fields as well, IRNA reported.

Zare said that the agreements reached between the two countries' presidents are significant in terms of politics, economy and culture, and could bring considerable benefits for Iran. The development of the tourism industry would bring economic prosperity for the Islamic Republic, the MP said, adding that developing the industry is one of the results of boosting Iran-Turkey economic and cultural ties.

He further noted that Turkey needs Iran's energy, gas, and oil resources, and Iran would enjoy economic benefits by exporting gas to its neighbor. Boosting trade ties with Ankara would also help Tehran mitigate effects of the anti-Iran sanctions.

Iran's oil exports hit five-year high despite US sanctions

Iran's oil exports have hit a five-year high in spite of US sanctions, helping to prevent a sharp increase in oil prices triggered by the conflict in West Asia.

According to the Nikkei Asian Review, Iranian exports of crude oil grew by roughly 50 percent last year to a five-year high of about 1.29 million barrels per day.

The major English-language Japanese weekly noted that the vast majority of Iran's oil exports were going to China.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) has said Iran produced 2.99 million barrels of oil daily in 2023, or 440,000 barrels more than its production in 2022.

The agency predicted Iran dai-

ly crude production to increase another 160,000 barrels in 2024. Rapidly-growing Chinese demand for more crude is encouraging Iran to ramp up its oil production. Dozens of oil refineries in China are now purchasing oil from Iran.

Based on data and analytics gathered by the Kpler research company in Europe, some 90 percent of Iran's crude oil exports went to China.

In past years, the Islamic Republic has been working towards building its bonds with China. Iran's president and his Chinese counterpart met in Beijing last February and agreed to call for US sanctions to be lifted.



Tehran, Moscow discuss accelerating Rasht-Astara railway construction



Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari and Russian officials conferred on ways to resolve the existing obstacles to the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway. Safari, who is in Moscow to attend the first meeting of BRICS representatives in 2024, in separate meetings on Thursday met and held talks with Russian presidential aide Igor Levitin and Deputy Minister of Transport Dmitry Zverev, IRNA reported.

Pointing to the two countries' presidents' emphasis on accelerating

the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway, Safari urged the swift settlement of the remaining issues to sign the executive contract of this agreement.

Meanwhile, Russian officials also called for removing existing obstacles in the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway, while pointing to expert talks with their Iranian counterparts.

On May 17, 2023, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia signed an agreement worth \$1.6 billion to build the Rasht-Astara railway, a project in northern Iran that will be key to

transit of cargo through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was present in the ceremony where the contract was signed. Russian President Vladimir Putin attended via a video conference link.

The 162-kilometer railway will connect the city of Rasht, near the Caspian Sea, to Astara on the border with Azerbaijan. Once completed, the rail link will allow rail freight transport from the Persian Gulf to Helsinki in Finland via Russia's Saint Petersburg.

Deutsche Bank to cut 3,500 jobs

Deutsche Bank (DBKGN.DE), opens new tab said it would cut 3,500 jobs, buy back shares and pay dividends, in its latest pitch to investors that its turnaround remains on track. The news came as Germany's biggest bank, seeking to put years of turmoil behind it and focus on steadier retail banking, reported a 30% drop in fourth-quarter profit that still beat analyst expectations, Reuters reported.

The bank had already announced plans to cut jobs, but this was the first time it had put a number on the layoffs, equivalent to just under 4% of its global workforce of about 90,000. The jobs affected will be

back office roles. The share buyback and dividends will total 1.6 billion euros (\$1.7 billion) and will take place during the first half of the year. The bank also raised its forecast for revenue growth, and its shares rose 4% in early Frankfurt trade.

The announcements and earnings come at a significant turning point for Deutsche Bank.

Deutsche Bank's retail unit overtook the investment bank as the main revenue driver in 2023, overturning the latter's pole position over the previous three years as the retail division benefited from higher interest rates and global deals fizzled.

Analysts expect the retail operations to keep up its streak ahead of the investment bank this year and next even as central banks gear up to cut the interest rates that have supercharged banks' bottom lines.

Deutsche Bank, which undertook a major overhaul in 2019 after years of losses, has tried to wean itself off from its dependence on the volatile investment bank for revenues, something that proved difficult.

The ascendance of the retail division has come as it has drawn the scorn of regulators after it botched the integration of its Post-bank arm, leaving customers complaining that they were locked out of their accounts and unable to reach call centres.

The troubled integration has highlighted the challenges of a tie-up with another bank. Several weeks ago, merger speculation involving Deutsche gained traction but the bank moved to douse the talk.



Domestic petchem industry promoting cooperation with foreigners

The cooperation between Iran's petrochemical sector and the foreign companies has increased remarkably during the past two years, an official said. CEO of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) of Iran, Morteza

Shahmirzaei, said the Iranian petrochemical industry has made great progress despite the cruel sanctions imposed by the US and the Western governments. The petrochemical industry's current production capacity in Iran stands at above

92 million tons, Shahmirzaei added, Shana reported.

He also noted that the administration of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has prepared the ground for closer interaction with the like-minded and neighboring countries.



Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Explore the mosaic of climate, history, and natural wonders in Shahrud



Abr Forest
● safarzon.com

Iranica Desk

The climate diversity of Shahrud is striking, with the shortest distance from the desert to the forest in the area being about 45 kilometers. Within this short distance, one can

reach the world-renowned Hyrcanian Forests to the north, boasting stunning landscapes, and to the south, the desert and the beauty of the Chah Jam region, ultimately leading to the date palm groves where the local people are engaged

in camel husbandry. This climate diversity, coupled with the variety of ethnic and linguistic groups, has made tourism development a key feature in the county. Shahrud is recognized as one of the ecotourism centers of Iran, situated

on the Tehran-Mashhad route, and neighboring the central and northern provinces of the country. The city offers unique opportunities in various tourism sectors, including historical, mystical, and natural tourism.

The historical settlement in Shahrud dates back to 1,000 BCE, as evidenced by artifacts obtained from excavations of historical hills in the area. Historical documents suggest that caravanserais used to pass through Shahrud on the west-

ern to eastern highway (Silk Road). The presence of a chapar khaneh and caravanserai turned Shahrud into an important settlement in the region. Therefore, the oldest remaining monument in Shahrud is attributed to the Ilkhanid period.



Shahrud Museum
● IRNA

Shahrud Museum

The building of the Shahrud Museum was constructed in 1928 and it has been registered on Iran's National Heritage List. After undergoing restoration and revitalization in March 1989, the museum opened its doors for research and public visitation. The museum houses a collection of historical, cultural, archaeological, and anthropological objects. The building was constructed in the late Qajar and early Pahlavi architectural style. The archaeological section of the museum, located on the ground floor, includes four rooms and a corridor containing artifacts from pre-Christian, prehistoric, and Islamic periods.

The anthropology section of the museum showcases tools, production arts, animal husbandry, agriculture, clothing, bread-baking arts, jewelry, hand-woven textiles, documents, and personal belongings. It also displays tools and equipment used in traditional ceremonies, traditional medicine, and images depicting the daily activities and life of the local people, providing a comprehensive insight into rural life.



Bastam Historical Complex
● IRNA

Bastam Historical Complex

Bastam Historical Complex comprises monuments dating back from the 3rd century AH (816-913 CE) onwards, including the tomb of Abu Yazid Tayfur ibn Isa ibn Surushan Bastami, a renowned Iranian mystic. The complex features 17 structures from various historical periods, including the Buyid, Seljuk, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safavid, Qajar, and Pahlavi eras. The earliest structure, a small mosque under the second mosque of Abu Yazid, is linked to the time of Abu Yazid Bastami's life and is located adjacent to the shrine of Imamzadeh Mohammad (PBUH). The complex includes the Khaneqah of Abu Yazid, Bastam Minaret, Jaame Mosque of Bastam, Shrine of Imamzadeh Mohammad, Kashaneh Tower, Ghazan Khan Dome, Shahrokhieh school, and more.

The Jaame Mosque is situated in the southern part of the complex, with its *shabestans* (prayer rooms) constructed on the western and northern sides. The Kashaneh Tower was built concurrently with the Jaame Mosque, on the southeast side of the complex. This historical complex has been officially registered on Iran's National Heritage List.



Olang Forest
● pinorest.com

Abr Forest

Cloud Forest, known as Abr Forest in Persian, is located 40 kilometers northeast of Shahrud. At higher altitudes, it mainly consists of grasslands or wooded pastures, while at lower elevations it transforms into a diverse forest with various species. Abr Forest is the second natural site in Iran listed on the World Heritage List, after the Lut Desert, and it is one of the most beautiful and pleasant climate forests in the world. It is situated near the tourist destination village of Abr. The forest is often covered in clouds, hence its name. To reach the forest, one must pass through the village of Abr.

Olang Forest

Olang Forest is located 85 kilometers north of Shahrud, on the northern slopes of the country. The most significant feature of the area is the presence of forests with a combination of different and diverse tree species, particularly enjoyable during the spring and summer seasons. The high-altitude forests and easy access to the environment, as well as the diversity of wildlife and tree species are important attractions for tourism in this region.

Qatri Forest

Qatri Forest is located between the Olang and Cloud forests. The best way to access it is from Abr village on the road linking to Imamzadeh Mohammad Saravin Ghatrri. Due to its location in a mountainous region, the area has a cold and moderate mountainous climate.

Mojen and Tang-e Dastan waterfall

The city of Mojen is situated 35 kilometers northwest of Shahrud in a mountainous area. The famous Tang-e Dastan waterfall is located 10 kilometers from Mojen and 45 kilometers from Shahrud. Due to the area's location in a mountainous region, at an elevation of about 2,000 meters above sea level, the climate in the spring, summer, and early autumn seasons is suitable for tourist activities.

Touran Biosphere Reserve

The Touran Biosphere Reserve consists of three parts: a national park (8%), a wildlife refuge (17%), and a protected area (75%). This area is located in the southern part of the Tehran-Mashhad highway, northeast of the Dasht-e Kavir (Kavir Desert), west of the Khar Turan region, and east of the Turud region.

After the Nayband Wildlife Refuge, this reserve is the second-largest protected area under the Environmental Protection Organization. Khar Turan is known as the Africa of Iran. This area is located 140 kilometers southeast of Shahrud, 28 kilometers southeast of Biarjomand, and in the central north of the Iranian desert.

Qaleh-ye Bala village

Qaleh-ye Bala village is a tourist destination located near the Turan Biosphere Reserve, 13 kilometers from the city of Biarjomand. The historical and architectural structure of the village, which is in a stepped form, has provided the groundwork for the presence of domestic and foreign tourists. The villages of Givers, Dezyan, and Qaleh Ahmad are located in the vicinity of Qaleh-ye Bala village, where some historical structures such as watermills, baths, and more can be visited.

Khoshyeylaq Wildlife Refuge

The Khoshyeylaq Wildlife Refuge is located in the northeastern part of Shahrud. This area is one of the first protected areas in Iran and has been designated as a wildlife refuge since 1985.

Farahzad Tash Area and Haft Rang Spring

The Farahzad Tash Area and Haft Rang (Seven-Color) Spring are located in Shahrud in the central part of the Alborz Mountains. Due to the abundant water and lush pastures, agriculture and animal husbandry are the main occupations of the people. Haft Rang Spring has been a focus of local attention due to its beauty and therapeutic properties. Farahzad is named for the lush fields and orchards of the area, and Haft Rang Spring is so named because of the springs that display different colors due to the passage of various minerals.

Torud area

The Torud desert area in Shahrud encompasses the largest date palm grove in the northeastern part of the country and, along with the beautiful desert sands, presents another glimpse of the power of God. This village is located 125 kilometers south of Shahrud in the central desert region of Iran. The presence of sand dunes in this area and its proximity to the Chah Jam and Salt Lake make it one of the natural tourist attractions of the country.



Tang-e Dastan waterfall
● iranwonders.com



Touran Biosphere Reserve
● rokna.net



Qaleh-ye Bala village
● uspace.ir



Khoshyeylaq Wildlife Refuge
● balad.ir

By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

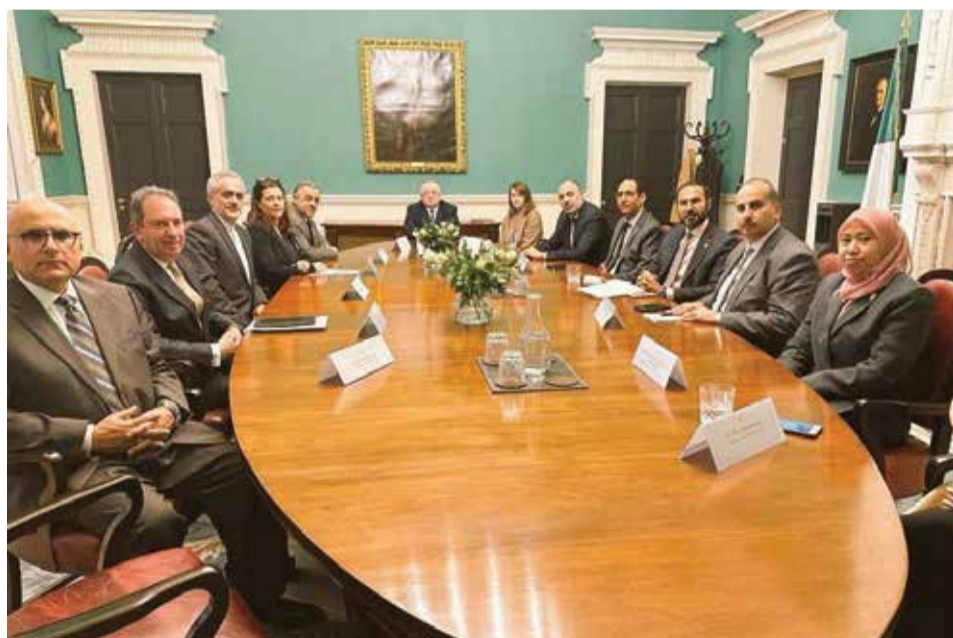
INTERVIEW

The head of the Iran-Ireland parliamentary friendship group said that both countries have similar positions on international issues that are only converging, highlighted by the fact that they consistently condemn the crimes of the Zionist occupying regime and advocate for the rights of the Palestinian people. Eqbal Shakeri told Iran Daily in an exclusive interview that the common historical experiences and close positions of the two countries on various political and international issues have accelerated the expansion of bilateral ties.



Pro-Palestinian protesters rally outside the Irish Parliament in Dublin on November 15, 2023, in support of a motion that urged Ireland's government to back South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
● GETTY IMAGES

Iran, Ireland positions on Palestine, int'l issues 'converging': MP



Envoys of Muslim countries to Ireland including Iran's Kazem Sharif Kazemi (3rd-L) meet with Speaker of the Irish Parliament Sean O Fearghail (C) in Dublin on November 8, 2023, to call on the country to join international efforts to halt the Israeli military operations against the people of Gaza.
● IRNA

"Iran and Ireland have common interests in many areas, and therefore, in most cases, they have established amicable ties and signed mutually beneficial agreements," he added. For instance, the Iranian MP pointed out that members of the Irish parliament have always supported the positions of their Iranian counterparts, and "in return, we have had close cooperations in support of each other". "Since Ireland has an anti-racist and anti-imperialist

stance, it naturally has established friendly and positive relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has always supported freedom-loving and oppressed countries. We have observed this especially in the case of the Palestinian issue, as the Irish, like Iranians, have repeatedly expressed their support for Palestinians." Referring to President Ebrahim Raisi's policy of developing relations with friendly and neighboring countries, he said, "I believe the achievements of the government in developing foreign relations have

gone far beyond the anticipated plans, and through government actions, we have joined various international organizations, such as BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and expanded relations with various countries."

"Currently, there are numerous friendship groups formed between the Iranian parliament and many countries, and there is close communication among our parliament members. With other countries that we do not have joint parliamentary friendship groups, we establish communication through working groups and joint economic commissions."

According to Shakeri, the Iranian Parliament strives to have members of the parliamentary friendship groups "present and actively engaged in addressing bilateral issues" during the traveling visits of the Iranian president or officials to other countries.

The Iranian lawmaker continued: "We also hold periodic webinars with friendship groups from various countries, discussing issues related to the development of bilateral cooperation and international current affairs. In recent weeks and months, the Gaza issue has been one of the focal points of our virtual discussions and correspondences, during which we usually ask them to utilize the common capacities for resolving this crisis."

Shakeri's points are substantiated. A review of contemporary history would highlight the common grounds and shared experiences of Iran and Ireland, which, in turn, justifies the establishment of strong political relations between the two countries. Both countries have fought against colonization, in particular, and foreign domination and influence, in general, over the past century or so. It is noteworthy that this wasn't a top-down policy; rather, the people of both countries have been decisive in determining the fate of their countries.

In contemporary times, the two nations have been severely impacted by numerous negative political phenomena, as wars, foreign military interventions,



sieges, sanctions, and famines resulting from foreign occupation have been imposed on Iran and Ireland, separately. Both have paid a heavy price in their struggles for independence through popular movements and uprisings. Many lives were sacrificed in the process.

Although Ireland is a member of the European Union and many of its domestic and foreign policy decisions are made within the framework of the union's passed policies, its government has not been indifferent to national sentiments in supporting the rights of the oppressed Palestinian people.

Diplomatic relations between Iran and Ireland were established in February 1976, based on a joint statement released by the representatives of both countries in New York. Following this, the Islamic Republic of Iran appointed its ambassador to the Netherlands as its non-resident ambassador to Ireland. Ireland, in turn, opened its representative office in Tehran in 1976 by sending a chargé d'affaires to Tehran. Since then, the joint economic commission of the two countries has held meetings in Dublin and Tehran at the level of foreign ministers.

Israel failed to learn from Northern Ireland peace process



By Colin John Irwin
Research fellow

OPINION

negotiating teams, of which I was a part, did in Northern Ireland.

There is no peace in the Middle East because there is no effective peace process. This isn't because the Palestinians and Israelis do not know how to make peace. They do. The Good Friday Agreement, which brought peace to Northern Ireland a quarter of a century ago, provided a clear guide. They have to do what the

The problem is Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ally, the United States of America, who have failed to apply the lessons of Northern Ireland to Middle East peacemaking. To fully understand the tragedy this represents, it's necessary to go back in time to the negotiations that achieved the Good Friday Agreement in 1997. At the time I was working, together with two other Northern Ireland-based academics, Fred Boal and Tom Hadden, and developing a range of public polls to gauge opinion about how to achieve peace.

As the principal investigator on the Peace Building and Public Policy in Northern Ireland project — independent of government and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) — my role was to develop relations with all the parties to the Northern Ireland peace process and act as an informal negotiator and manager of public opinion and public diplomacy. The public was kept informed through reports and articles in the local newspaper, the Belfast Telegraph. It was key to the process that people of all shades of political opinion were not only involved but were fully informed at all times.

Critically, all the parties to the conflict in Northern Ireland were democratically elected to participate in the peace negotiations there, including the Irish Republican Army represented by Sinn Féin, as well as the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Freedom Fighters represented by their political leaderships, the Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party, respectively.

In all, I had to work with eight political parties negotiating and agreeing questions for public opinion polls designed to resolve issues in the formal negotiations that had yet to be settled.

How 'peace polls' work

These "peace polls" were unlike "partisan polls" designed to underline the public's support for a particular policy favoured by one party or another (most commonly a government). Instead, the polls — which I developed with a partner from each of the eight political parties elected to the formal negotiations — aimed to fairly and objectively measure the public's support, from both sides, for every possible policy option across the political spectrum. The objective was to determine the precise points of common ground, where they existed, or effective compromise where it was needed for peacemaking.

Public opinion polls are an American invention and, fortunately for me, Bill Clinton's special envoy to Northern Ireland and the "talks" chairman, Senator George Mitchell, took the polls very seriously and gave me every possible support.

When the British offered to run the polling project for the parties, the parties rebelled and insisted on working with me with JRCT funding. So, I always made a point of hand-delivering the reports to Mitchell and the parties the day before they were published. And each time the polling reports were published, deals got done until we reached an agreement that we knew could pass a referendum, which was eventually held on May 22, 1998.

The legitimacy of the Good Friday Agreement was ensured by the full democratic participation of all the parties to the agreement and the people of Northern Ireland. Through public opinion polls, the people gained a seat at the negotiating table, and through a referendum, the deal was made.

Tragically, the peoples of Israel and Palestine have been prevented from learning and applying these same peace lessons to the resolution of their conflict.

When it all went wrong

In January 2009, the newly elected US president, Barack Obama, appointed Mitchell as his special envoy for Middle East peace, in the hope he could bring the success of the Good Friday Agreement peace process to Israel and Palestine. Expecting Obama to appoint Mitchell to this post following his successful election in 2008, I was invited to run a peace poll in Israel and Palestine.

I was flown to Washington in June 2009 along with my Israeli and Palestinian polling team. Presentations were arranged for us in the US House of Representatives and Senate, and various think tanks to brief all the politicians and experts with an interest in Middle East peace.

I had been in touch with Mitchell and met him in his office at the State Department. At that time, I had also been running peace polls in Sri Lanka with support from the Norwegians. They were a generous and reliable funder and had indicated they would be willing to support my work in Israel and Palestine if Mitchell wanted them to.

Mitchell welcomed the Norwegian offer, and arrangements were made to take it up, but it all fell through —

my gut feeling was that the State Department wanted to have control of the research to meet their own agenda. So, I did not get the funding and Mitchell eventually resigned his post without achieving peace in May 2011. Of course, it can be argued that even if I had brought the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process to Israel and Palestine, I would have failed. But I had made all necessary preparations and contacts with all the parties to the conflict to make it work. I knew what I was doing — as did Mitchell when he accepted his appointment from Obama.

Over a period of two months of interviews to develop the questionnaire, in November and December of 2008, I had private meetings with all the relevant stakeholders, including the then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Shimon Peres on the Israeli side. My pollster, Mina Zemach, was a good friend of Peres and had been his pollster when he led the Labour Party.

On the Palestinian side, the non-governmental organisation organising the project, OneVoice, had close connections with Fatah, the political party founded by

Yasser Arafat and others in the 1950s, which was at that stage dominant within the Palestinian Authority. So, I arranged to meet with Hamas via an introduction from Ghassan Khatib, an independent Palestinian politician and director of the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre.

Speaking with Hamas was like speaking with Sinn Féin. They had an extreme negotiating position, but that is all it was: a negotiating position. Like Sinn Féin, they had a legitimate grievance and said they would be happy to cooperate with the peace polls. Of course, the impact of the Hamas attack of October 7 and Israel's assault on Gaza has profoundly reshaped public opinion on all sides.

Violence on both sides of the Troubles that continued even as the talks were progressing meant that at times, many thought we would never achieve a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. But such tragedies can either doom negotiations or inspire renewed effort. People have a choice. We carried on.

Significantly, the one key interlocutor who refused to meet with me in December 2008 was Netanyahu. He

only consented to send his chief of staff. Zemach said this was because he would refuse to compromise on sharing Jerusalem as part of any peace agreement. And when he became Israel's prime minister in March 2009, he also refused to include Hamas in any peace negotiations.

My experience told me that excluding Sinn Féin and the other paramilitary organisations from peace negotiations in Northern Ireland had only brought failure, while their inclusion had enabled the peace settlement. Other parties essential to the success of the Northern Ireland peace process had been the centre Alliance Party and Women's Coalition.

The politically equivalent party in Israel was Meretz, a left-wing socialist party and strong supporter of the Peace Now movement. When I met with them, like Alliance, they told me they would be pleased to be part of a fully inclusive peace process, but they were excluded from negotiations as they were not part of Netanyahu's coalition government.

The establishment in Washington did not have a problem with my contacts with Hamas. In 2009, I had also been working on a project in Sudan with the US Institute of Peace. Although Hamas was deemed a proscribed terrorist organisation, the Institute for Peace lawyers said it was OK for me to meet and talk with them provided I did not give them any assistance. They advised me "not to even buy them a coffee". I took this advice. Hamas provided the coffee.

But without inclusive negotiations that also drew on the public's desire for an end to the bloodshed, peace was not achieved.

In 2013, when I was in New York for meetings at the UN, I took the opportunity to visit Mitchell at his law office and asked him why he had resigned. He said it was because he was not getting sufficient support from the State Department. I had planned to reveal this in a book I was writing. But a trusted colleague and friend advised me against it, as it could reflect badly on the former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, when she was campaigning to be president in the run-up to the 2016 election.

Accordingly, I watered down the quote to say something about the lack of sufficient support in Washington. It was not untrue, but it was not the whole truth.

Misplaced optimism

In my optimism at the time, I thought perhaps that Clinton — if she became president — would send her husband to the Middle East as her special envoy. Bill Clinton had got very close to making an agreement some years earlier with the "Clinton parameters", but he ran out of time. And then Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 election to Donald Trump — and so we are where we are.

It is just as likely that my optimism was misplaced and that Clinton and possibly Joe Biden — who has always been a very strong supporter of Israel — did not want to oppose Netanyahu for domestic political reasons.

When the Good Friday Agreement was struck 25 years ago, both Mitchell and I thought Israel and Palestine would be our next challenge. But Al Gore, who we had hoped might set his sights on a peace deal, lost to Bush, and then 9/11 happened, and the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq took all the political oxygen out of peacemaking.

Then, 15 years ago, we thought it would happen when Obama was elected. It should have. Another opportunity may well arrive when the present war is over. The Hamas' attack on October 7 and Israel's response have raised the stakes for peace considerably. Elections in the US, Israel, and Palestine may also put the peace process on hold yet again. But this must not prevent people of goodwill from talking peace. And it can work, history tells us as much.

Sadly, Israel and Palestine are not alone in their cycles of violence and grief. All over the world, the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process are ignored. Frozen conflicts remain frozen at best and with increased frequency, become unstable and violent. Over centuries, the cost of war has often been measured in "blood and treasure". It's fair to say that since 2009, in the Middle East and elsewhere we've seen "blood" in thousands of lives lost and "treasure" in billions of dollars wasted, again and again.



The illustration explores the prospects of peace between Palestine and Israel through a ballot box.
● M. RYDER/SEATTLE TIMES



Former US president Barack Obama (2nd-R) talks with George Mitchell (2nd-L), American then-special envoy to the Middle East, as well as former secretary of state Hillary Clinton (R) and former vice president Joe Biden during a meeting in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington on February 4, 2009.
● KEVIN DIETSCH/UPI

AFC Asian Cup:

Iran looking to benefit from underdog tag against Blue Samurai

Sports Desk

A place at the AFC Asian Cup semifinals will be at stake when two of the continental heavyweights in Iran and Japan square off in Al Rayyan's Education City Stadium today.

Iran's last-16 test was in stark contrast to what the Japanese went through, as the Blue Samurai enjoyed a comfortable 3-1 victory over Bahrain, while Team Melli made a hard work of the game against Syria later on Wednesday.

What was supposed to be an easy fixture turned out to become a nail-biting one for Amir Qalenoee's men, who created the best of the chances during the 1-1 stalemate but eventually had goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand to thank for making the all decisive save in the shootout win.

Qalenoee's side – the oldest squad in the competition – has had less than 72 hours of recovery for today's clash and as if the Iranian fans needed more reason to be anxious about the game, their team will be without the talisman Mahdi Taremi – Iran's top scorer in Qatar – after he received his marching orders for a second bookable offense in the closing stages of normal time against Syria – a déjà vu for the prolific striker, who also missed the last-four 3-0 defeat against Japan in the 2019 edition.

The history of the head-to-head between the two sides also make Hajime Moriyasu's men the favorites to progress to the semifinals as Japan was unbeaten in the previous four Asian Cup meetings between the two sides, winning twice, while Iran's last triumph over today's opponent in all competitions dates back to 2005, when Vahid Hashemian bagged a brace for a 2-1 win on home soil



Iranian players look on during the shootout against Syria in the AFC Asian Cup last 16 in Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium, Doha, Qatar, on January 31, 2024.

ROBERTUS PUDYANTO/AFC

in the World Cup qualifiers. For all the facts and figures being in Japan's favor, Qalenoee will still hope to see his team build on the typical Iranian sense of honor and integrity in pursuit of a first trophy in the continent's flagship international event in

nearly five decades. The Iranian coach, who he did not hesitate to show his frustration with "some of the senior players on the pitch" after Wednesday's hard-fought victory, will also be desperate to see the likes of Sardar Azmoun, Alireza Jahan-

bakhsh, and Saman Qoddous rise up to the occasion and make up for Taremi's absence. While Iran has always proved to beat the odds when coming up against a rather stronger opponent, producing some memorable and heroic performances

throughout the years, Japanese boss Moriyasu has had his own woes over the course of the four outings in the tournament. Having had their 11-game winning streak come to an end with a shock 2-1 loss to Iraq in the group phase, the Japanese has looked

vulnerable at times, even against minnow opponents in Vietnam and Indonesia, while their keeper Zion Suzuki has been far from reliable between the posts, making a series of blunders, including the one that led to Bahrain's goal in the previous round.

Hamilton's Ferrari move was always on the cards

REUTERS – Lewis Hamilton's multi-year deal to race for Ferrari from 2025 means the seven-times world champion is likely to see out his Formula One career in red, the most successful driver in the history of the sport racing for the most decorated team.

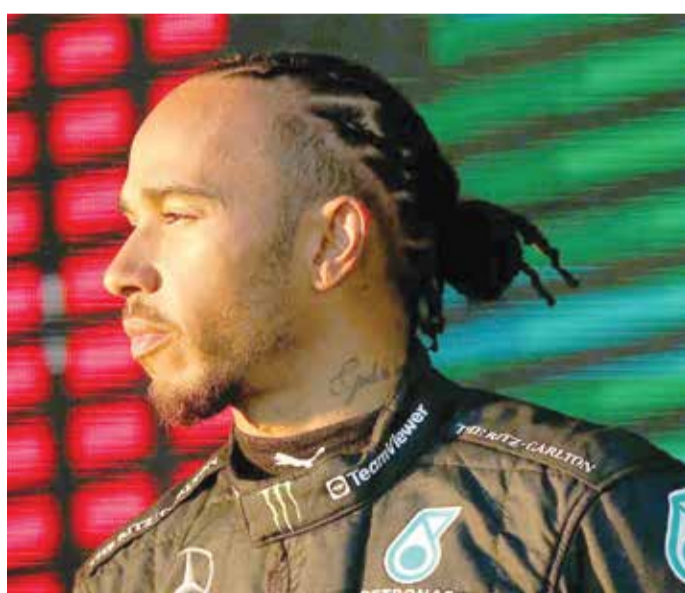
If the surprise news shook the sport on Thursday, coming only five months after the 39-year-old Briton signed a two-year extension with Mercedes, there was also logic to the switch.

Hamilton has long had a fascination with Ferrari, even if Mercedes have backed him from boyhood, and speculation about a potential dream-come-true move to Maranello has punctuated his career.

He has owned the Italian sportscars and, over the years, acknowledged the allure of the most historic and glamorous of marques.

"It's definitely going to be crazy to think that I never drove for Ferrari," he said in 2021. "Because for everyone that's a dream position to be in."

Mercedes have won only one race in the past two years, after eight successive constructors'



MARTIN KEEP/AFP

titles, whereas Ferrari were the only team to beat Red Bull last year.

Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff recognised the attraction in 2019 when he spoke of conversations with his driver, who now has a record 103 wins, about a possible move.

"You have to simply acknowledge that probably it's in every driver's head to drive at Ferrari

one day," the Austrian told reporters then.

"It's the most iconic, historic Formula One brand out there and I totally respect if a driver has the desire to drive at Ferrari."

Until now, it had been felt that the bond with Mercedes was unbreakable, but Hamilton could not resist the allure of the only team to have competed in

every season of the championship since 1950.

Ralf Schumacher, whose brother Michael won five of his seven titles in a golden era of Ferrari from 2000-2004, saw the appeal as the icing on the cake of a stellar career.

"I think Ferrari is one of the places to be in the history of Formula One," he told Sky Sports television.

"Especially for a driver like Lewis that achieved almost everything and was very unlucky not to be eight-time world champion, to be honest.

"I think for him it is just the dot on the i to make it perfect."

Damon Hill, the 1996 world champion, suspected Hamilton would have stayed at Mercedes if he thought there was a real chance of winning a record eighth title there.

"I think he's got to the point where he's probably heard the music coming out of Mercedes maybe a few too many seasons and started to think 'well, I need to invigorate my final years in Formula One, what better way to do it than to drive for Ferrari?'"

"At least I've got a chance. If it goes wrong, at least I've tried."

Gitipasand crowned Iran Premier Futsal League champion



IRNA

Sports Desk

Isfahan-based club Gitipasand sealed the Iranian Premier Futsal League title with four games to spare thanks to a 4-0 away victory over Farsh Ara. Mohammad Derakhshani found the net twice, with Bahman Ja'fari and Mahdi Karimi also on the scoresheet as Mohammad Keshavarz's team celebrated a fourth top-flight crown – first since the 2021/22 season after Mes Sungun had lifted a record fifth trophy last term.

This was a remarkable 21st victory in 22 outings for the newly-crowned champions,

who failed to leave the pitch without maximum points only once, when they settled for a 1-1 draw against Ana San'at Pasargad last October. Mes, meanwhile, came from behind to beat Poushak Hafez Sari 2-1 – courtesy of goals from Hamid Ahmadi and Farhad Fakhim against Taha Mortazavi's strike for a 3-1 defeat at Ana San'at but stays on course for a third-spot finish in the league as it holds an eight-point lead over its victorious opponent.

Raisi: Iran will 'respond firmly' to any attack



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (R) visits the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' naval base in southern city of Bandar Abbas on February 2, 2024.
● president.ir

International Desk

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi issued a stern warning Friday against any possible attack by the United States in retaliation for a strike that killed three American troops in Jordan. "We have said many times that we will not be the initiator of any war, but if a country, a cruel force wants to bully, the Islamic Republic of Iran will respond firmly," Raisi said during a trip to the southern province of Hormuzgan.

Iran's "military power in the region was not and is not a threat to any coun-

try," but a source of security that countries in the region can rely on and trust, he said.

"Today, the enemy has no ability to do anything against us; because they know that our forces are powerful and capable."

"In the past, whenever they wanted to talk to Iran, they used the language of threat such as the military option is on the table but now, we don't hear those words rather they say even that they are not seeking war," he said in an indirect reference to past US policies as well as the recent remarks by some American officials follow-

ing the deadly strike in Jordan.

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Chief Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Major General Hossein Salami had also warned of a crushing response to any act of aggression.

The death of the American soldiers in a drone strike at a base in Jordan on Sunday marked the first US military losses to hostile fire in the region since the Israel's brutal war on the Gaza Strip began on October 7. The United States has blamed groups which it claims are supported by

Iran for the attack.

US President Joe Biden has said he has already decided on the nature of the US response to the deadly bombing, but has not detailed the plans in public, or the timing, while insisting that he is not seeking a wider war in the Middle East.

The White House warned that "multiple actions" could be taken in retaliation for the attack.

Iran has denied any links to the attack and said it is not seeking an "expansion" of conflict in the Middle East.

Regional tensions have intensified since the Isra-

el's war o Gaza, drawing in resistance groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. The resistance groups have been attacking the US and Israel's targets in the region in support of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli regime has so far claimed the lives of more than 27,000 Palestinians, most of the women and children, the besieged Palestinian territory. The Islamic republic has repeatedly said it sees a duty to support the resistance groups in the region, but insists they are independent in decision and action.

Iran identifies 'tens' of Mossad spies in 28 countries

Iran's Intelligence Ministry said its forces have identified a significant number of spies linked to the Israeli Mossad spy agency in 28 countries across the world.

In a statement on Friday, the ministry announced what it described as the "largest combined intelligence and counter-intelligence operation" against the Israeli regime's espionage and security organizations.

The statement underlined that the "venturesome" operation was conducted in the form of a series of intelligence-counterintelligence, offensive-defensive actions, and through the use of various methods of intelligence gathering, which led to obtaining a "unique" and "unprecedented" collection of information, Press TV reported.

"In addition to intelligence and security findings, obtaining special information related to some of the most important secret military facilities, weapons factories, and strategic civilian industries of the usurping Zionist regime is also among the achievements of the ministry's large and multi-stage operation," the statement added.

Iran's Intelligence Ministry stressed that the combined project resulted in spotting "tens of spies and terrorist elements" affiliated with the Israeli regime in 28 countries across the world and in three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe.

Stopping short of naming the countries involved in the operation, the statement said, "A number of spies in Tehran and several provinces of the country" were identified and dealt with legally or kept under security surveillance. "Also, several Iranian spies residing abroad were identified."

Iran's Intelligence Ministry said the particulars of foreign spies active in countries with which the Islamic Republic maintains relations will be provided to their respective intelligence bodies for due measures, including punitive and intelligence.

Pointing to the background and records of the identified spies, the statement said some of them "voluntarily" cooperated with the Mossad and committed treason against their countries, adding that the Israeli agency "forced" them to carry out various treacherous operations against the interests of their respective countries. The ministry also underlined that the Israeli regime tapped into various methods and abused social media platforms as well as immigration and job-seeking sites to identify and communicate with the victims.

Cultural theology of ...

Therefore, the global ethical reconsideration is a religious matter, as analysts unanimously agree: "This ethical reconsideration must be understood within the framework of the three major religious traditions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, just as the resistance in Palestine is perceived as a religious matter."

Vulnerable civilization of West

Another aspect that allows us to discuss the "cultural theology of the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm" is the belief held by many intellectuals that what the world understood in the post-Al-Aqsa era was the "globalization of resistance" against the "global cultural recession." Western cultural decline has long entered the period of "identity crisis," and its civilizational situation, described by Huntington as a "Christian-Jewish heritage," is more fragile than ever. In such a situation, the rise of opposing forces against Western civilization increases the challenges faced by its governments, making their crisis situation both internally and ideologically much more complex than before.

In my view, the globalization of resistance accelerates a "global soft revolution," and this is not a mere slogan to be induced through propaganda and advertising, but it can be substantiated through scientific analysis. New studies provide evidence, such as the global inclination towards submissiveness and "formal activism" after the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Analysts interpret this inclination as a departure of world nations from the submissiveness of their governments regarding the Palestinian issue. People, independent of their governments, accused the Zionist regime of creating humanitarian disasters, completely diverging from the discourse of governments aligned with Zionism. Here, it can be assessed who chose the right side of history.

This process's formation is a result of the initiative and intellectual openness of the global resistance movement, giving it the ability to find its discourse in various thoughts. Secondly, due to its flexibility in forms and methods, the resistance movement can unite different nationalities around fundamental human values. This is an inher-

ent quality of Islam.

Quranic power and global revolution

The acceptance of resistance signifies a fresh dynamism between identity, religion, and society; a dynamism that has been unprecedented in contemporary history, with its starting point being the "Islamic Revolution of Iran," which, in Michel Foucault's words, marked the return of the spirit to a soulless world. Our revolution was able to gain global recognition for one reason only, and that was the reliance of the late Imam on the "Quranic power" of pure Islam.

The Islamic nature of the resistance movement, in line with the revolution, has been able to shape "formal activism" based on the "Quranic power," which is neither united nor disjointed and is now visibly the tip of the iceberg. As always, when Americans and Zionists are perplexed, this time too, it is inconceivable for Western theorists and liberal capitalist think tanks to envision a cultural alliance with a religious inclination, stemming from Islamic resistance, emerging with such power in the modern world. It forms an international aspi-

ration for liberation from the prison that was supposed to confine people forever in the global village. I emphasized a month before the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm at the "International Sun Conference" in Iran's northeastern city of Mashhad that the world ahead of us is a "revolutionary world," and the movement of followers of monotheistic religions towards reviving fundamental human values is only possible through breaking away from the process of Westernization and fighting against it. Today's signs and analyses can be considered the strongest support for the "theory of a revolutionary world."

Transformation of values in cultural world

It is evident that the global rise of resistance is due to something beyond confronting an apartheid regime, and one should not fall into the trap of pseudo-intellectual and pseudo-religious discourses in analyzing this issue. Instead, a critical approach should be taken towards these interpretations that downplay the issue. Although apartheid has always turned against itself, and many apartheid regimes have emerged throughout world history, most of them had limited territorial aspects. Zionist apartheid is not a

"limited national apartheid" in accordance with prevailing political theories. Rather, it is a global and universal apartheid. From this perspective, its nature differs from all other dictatorial, racist, and fundamentalist regimes. This particular demonic nature has also created a "special international sense of danger" in the minds of people, as if they have just realized that all their values, achievements, and existence may be at risk due to the existence of this global Zionist apartheid. Through this collective sense of danger, a "new global cultural community" is emerging, and its structures and anatomy can gradually be identified. This community has a collective narrative about the post-Al-Aqsa Storm world that needs further discussion.

Based on reliable research analyzing global attitudes, "the self-sacrifice and resilient resistance of Palestinians in liberating their land for survival in current conditions has turned into a collective and popular narrative, even including secular voices." Despite the propaganda by secular movements regarding the nature of this collective and global narrative, all its essential elements are derived from the epistemology of the Islamic Revolution and the discourse of resistance. Today, the world fully knows

and sees that the colonial, nationalist, and military project of the usurper Zionist regime over the past seventy years has transformed into a "global destructive radicalism" with no human qualities. The dragon is fully awake while a greater power rises to confront it. For people worldwide, it is now crystal clear that the goal of this destructive project is the annihilation of the history, identity, livelihood, presence, rights, life, and altogether the existence of Palestinians. Currently, it is the agency of the people that shapes the global scene against Zionism. This seed, planted solely by Imam Khomeini in the global consciousness, was to combat falsehood.

Issue of human liberation

Here, we return to the focal point of our discussion, which is the emergence of the cultural theology of the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm that transformed the ideal of "liberating the land" into the concept of "liberating humanity" for the world. As cultural resistance intellectuals and independent scholars outside this movement also unanimously agree and have discussed, the operation challenges the imperialist narrative that perpetuates discrimination, militarism,

oppression, racism, deceit, abuse of power, greed, dehumanization, and various forms of state violence with increasing intensity.

Now, the ethical reconsideration of the West after the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm has transcended theoretical debates and academic discussions, entering the realm of public discourse. This has brought about new social behaviors worldwide in support of Islamic resistance. The emergence of this "global unity" that has also been noticed by Iranian analysts is a "global capital" for the Islamic revolution. The wise leadership of Imam Khomeini has demonstrated that the revolution is not stagnant, and its benefits, directly and indirectly, contribute to its dynamism, increasing its "global capital."

During this period, through meetings and discussions with non-Muslim intellectuals, researchers, and professors, I have come to understand that what captivates them about Islamic resistance is the practical aspect of this cultural theology, which in their articles they have referred to as the "practical allure of theology." This is the same secret of the pure Islam of Imam Khomeini, which combines mysticism and struggle, making "Islamic mystic fighters" a global phenomenon.



Hostilities in Gaza Strip, Israel-reported impact

DAY 117

OVERVIEW

The snapshot provides a comprehensive overview of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza as of 1 February 2024, including casualties, particularly among women and children.

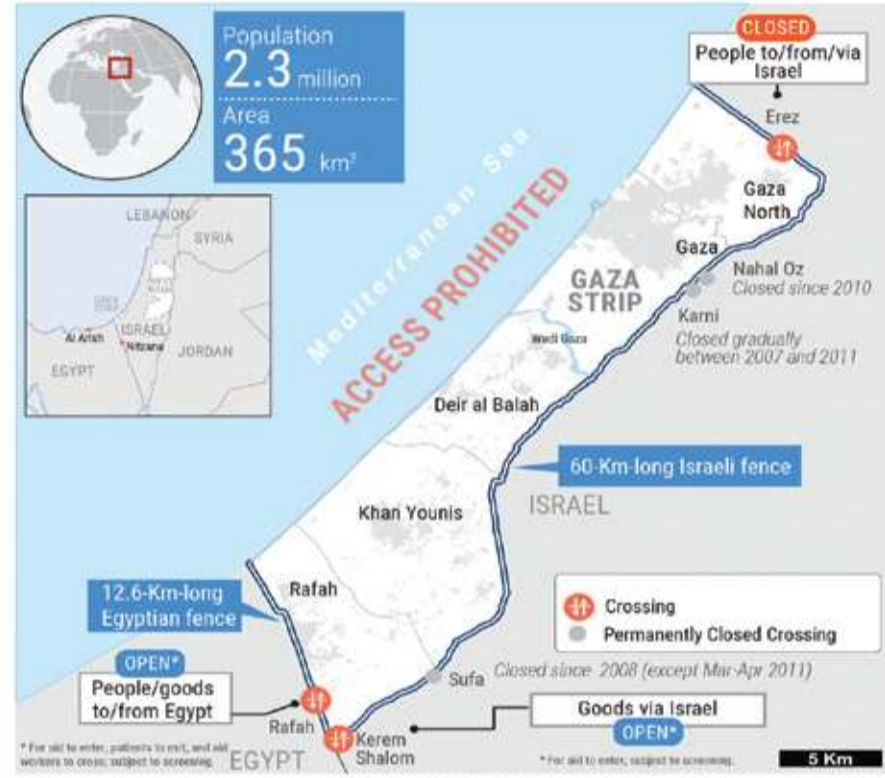
Significant damage has been inflicted upon critical infrastructure and essential services, affecting people's ability to maintain their dignity and basic living standards.

This snapshot highlights reported figures on the impact of hostilities on people in Gaza, where a major humanitarian crisis has unfolded.



*Source: MoH Gaza

**Source: UNRWA

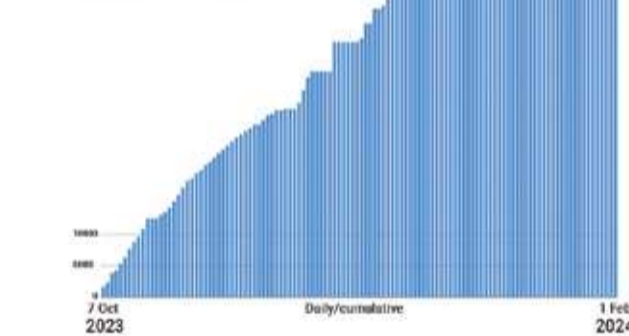
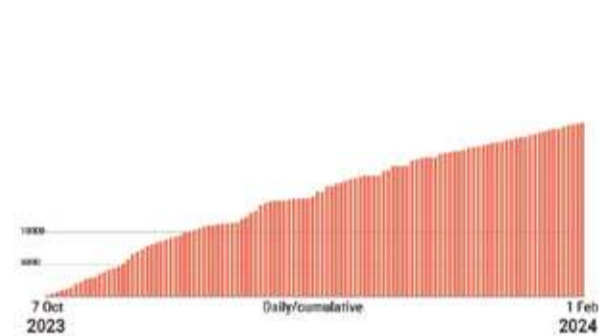


REPORTED CASUALTIES (Cumulative) as of 1 February 2024

Palestinians*

27,019 Reported fatalities
in addition to ~1,000 fatalities in Israel, including people involved in the 7 October attack

66,139 Reported injuries



*Source: MoH Gaza

Israelis**

Over 1,200*** Reported fatalities
 1,162 identified fatalities, including at least 33 children

~5,400 Reported injuries

222 Reported fatalities
1,293 Reported injuries
 136 hostages remain in Gaza (including soldiers and foreign nationals)

** According to Israeli media citing official sources
 *** The reported estimate includes foreign nationals

DAMAGE*



- Over 60% of Gaza's housing units reportedly destroyed or damaged
- 386 education facilities reportedly damaged
- 11 bakeries reportedly destroyed
- 122 ambulances damaged
- 20 WASH facilities damaged
- At least 3 churches and 161 mosques damaged

*GMO as of 30 Jan

BASIC SERVICES AND LIVELIHOODS

FOOD SECURITY*
 • 2.2 million people at imminent risk of famine
 • 378,000 people at Phase 5 (catastrophic levels) Phase 5 refers to extreme lack of food, starvation, and exhaustion of coping capacities.
 • 939,000 people at Phase 4 (emergency levels)
*Source: IPC, 21 December

WATER AND SANITATION
 • One out of the three water pipelines coming from Israel is operational.
 • No Access to clean water in the northern governorates. Fuel shortage impacts: 60 water wells, 2 desalination plants, sewage stations and pumps, wastewater treatment.

INCOMING TRUCKLOADS
 The pre-crisis average per working day in 2023 was 500 truckloads, including fuel.

HEALTH
 • Hospitals are under heavy strikes.
 • 14 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are partially functional: 7 in the south and 7 in the north.

At high risk
 At least 1,000 kidney failure, >2,000 cancer patients, 130 neonates in incubators.

Critical shortages
 of drugs, blood products and supplies (Fuel at the hospitals is being severely rationed).

EDUCATION
 625K (100%) Students with no access to education.
 90% of all school buildings have sustained significant damage.

HUMANITARIAN OPERATION
 • 154 UN staff killed: UNRWA: 152; WHO: 1; UNDP: 1
 • At least 339 health workers killed
 • 46 Civil Defence killed while on duty
 • 122 Journalists killed

MOVEMENT AND ACCESS
 • Civilian access to areas to the north of Wadi Gaza is only possible for humanitarian teams; however, of 51 missions to deliver humanitarian aid planned for the north of Wadi Gaza on 1-25 January, only eight were facilitated by the Israeli military while 29 were denied access. In the first two weeks of 2024 the Israeli military denied the access of more than 75 per cent of missions planned to those areas.
 • The Rafah crossing with Egypt and the Kerem Shalom crossing with Israel are open for the entry of approved goods.
 • The Rafah crossing is also open for the movement of some wounded and sick people from Gaza to Egypt, and aid workers into and out of Gaza.
 • Access to the sea and to areas near Israel's perimeter fence is prohibited.

