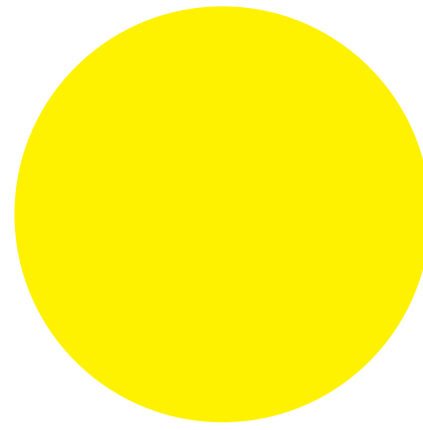




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Cameras against the massacre machine



By Jalal Khosh-Chehreh
Journalist

EXCLUSIVE OPINION

Journalists worldwide face substantial risks in their profession. We have observed the deaths of journalists in different wars such as World Wars I and II, the Balkan War, the Afghan War, and others. The situation in Gaza stands out, as 130 journalists have lost their lives within approximately five months due to Israeli attacks.

The key aspect of this war is the extreme aggression from the Israeli side, which many accurately have said that Israel is involved in ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Gaza Strip. This war, characterized by Israel's extreme violence, lacks any distinction between combatants and non-combatants, placing everyone at risk, including international aid workers and hospital patients.

International bodies, including the United Nations, have criticized Israel's crimes against Palestinians, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remains unaffected by these condemnations. Global organizations, especially the International Federation of Journalists, are expected to respond more vehemently, given the escalating situation in Gaza. But the reality is that these international institutions are unable to have a positive impact in times of crisis. What has raised global concern now is the possibility of an Israeli ground attack on Rafah, and has raised the question of where the war-torn people of Rafah should seek refuge from the fear of brutal Israeli attacks. Is there a safe place left in the Gaza Strip?

Despite the extensive crimes committed by Israel and the heightened insecurity, journalists persist in the region, committed to their duty of reporting the realities to the world. The widespread protests against Israel's actions in various cities worldwide owe much to the efforts and reports of these journalists who, despite facing threats themselves, bring the plight of innocent people and Israel's atrocities to global attention.

In their respective media outlets around the world, journalists have the responsibility to amplify the suffering and insecurity of their colleagues in Gaza. However, the challenge lies in Israel's approach to the conflict, where victory is pursued at any cost without concern for international condemnation of its unethical and inhumane policies. Journalists, like other non-combatants, become victims of Israel's aggressive policies, yet they stand resilient with their pens and cameras against the massacre machine.



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First Iranian Music Night held in Riyadh

In a cultural initiative aimed at improving ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Ambassador to Riyadh Ali-reza Enayati, expressed hope for diverse cultural programs in the future. He made the statement during the Iranian Music Night held in Riyadh on February 15, IRNA wrote. 8 >



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NEWS IN BRIEF

Iran to take 'reciprocal action' if its ships are seized:

Top official

Iran's Vice President for Legal Affairs Mohammad Dehqan said the country will reciprocate if its ships are seized illegally, as the United States acknowledges the confiscation of Iranian oil. Speaking to ISNA on Thursday, Dehqan said, "The legal path is not closed" regarding measures vis-à-vis Washington's confiscation of Iranian crude.

"If an Iranian ship is seized, we will take reciprocal action," he warned American officials.

On February 2, the US Department of Justice announced that it had seized more than 520,000 barrels of Iran's oil aboard the crude tanker Abyss, which had been anchored in the Yellow Sea en route to China. It claimed the seizure was linked to sanctions-evasion charges and an oil trafficking network that allegedly finances Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC).

Dehqan noted that he was not able to confirm whether US authorities had seized an Iranian vessel, adding that the Oil Ministry and related companies should comment on the news. "This is because sometimes they (the Americans) seize a ship and mistakenly regard it as ours," he said. Under the guise of "sanctions-enforcement operations," the United States has in recent years seized foreign vessels carrying Iranian oil across the world. However, Iranian exports of crude oil grew by roughly 50 percent in 2023 to a five-year high of about 1.29 million barrels per day.

Gas pipelines damaged in terrorist attacks repaired: *NIGC*

Two gas transmission pipelines damaged in terrorist attacks were completely repaired, said the dispatching director of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) on Friday.

Talking to a TV channel, Saeid Aqli added the gas pipelines will operate at maximum capacity soon, Shana reported. Two explosions struck the gas transmission pipelines at around 1 a.m. local time on Wednesday (21:30 GMT), hitting the lines in Borujen, western province of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Safa-Shahr, southern province of Fars.

Tehran, Yerevan seeking annual trade of \$3b



Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia Mher Grigoryan said Iran and Armenia can increase the volume of trade to \$3 billion.

Grigoryan made the remarks in the 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Commission, calling Iran "a very important partner", IRNA reported.

The president of the Islamic Republic and the Prime Minister of Armenia agreed in 2022 that the volume of trade between the two countries would increase to 1 billion in the first and 3 billion in the next step. The two countries' joint economic commission is a good ground to help realize the objective, he added.

The 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Eco-

conomic Commission was held on February 14-15 in Tehran to further foster economic ties between the two countries. During the meeting, Head of Iran's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Heidar Mohammadi voiced the country's readiness to export domestically produced drugs to Armenia.

Also, Deputy Minister of Healthcare of Armenia Lena Nanushyan said that Iran has made significant progress in the production of medicines and medical equipment. Armenia welcomes cooperation with Iran in the field of health tourism,

pharmaceutical insurance, and healthcare, the official added. In a related development, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari held talks with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan. During the meeting, Kostanyan welcomed the presence of Iranian companies in the road construction projects of Armenia. Meanwhile, the two countries on Thursday signed documents to expand mutual cooperation in 19 fields, on the sidelines of the 18th meeting of their Joint Economic Commission that concluded on Thursday.

Investment bids in Iranian FTZs top €3.1b

The total value of bids for investment, by domestic and foreign investors, in the free trade zones of Iran surpassed €3.1 billion in the current Iranian year, an official said.

In comments on Thursday, the secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones described the free trade zones as the driving force of Iran's economic growth over the past months, reported Tasnim News Agency.

Hojjatollah Abdolmaleki noted that the free trade

and special economic zones have considerable tourist attractions and present great investment opportunities.

He said more than 1,000 investment packages, valued at €20 billion, have been defined in the current year, noting that the plans have been presented at 12 prestigious domestic and foreign events.

Free zones, known as the paradise of investment, have been introduced to the investors, he said, adding that the total value of requests for investment in the free trade zone, mainly

submitted by the domestic investors, has reached €3.1 billion.

Abdolmaleki also noted that 100 investment packages for the tourism industry have been compiled so far, putting the value of packages at more than €1 billion.

Pointing to the Qeshm and Kish free trade zones as examples of the zones with excellent investment opportunities, he said the two Persian Gulf islands attract hundreds of thousands of domestic and foreign tourists every year, IRIB news reported.

Tehran determined to use BRICS capacities: *Minister*

Iran's Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi in a meeting with Rustam Minnikhanov, the visiting president of Russia's autonomous republic of Tatarstan said the Islamic Republic has started the process of joining the BRICS bloc and serious measures are being taken by the ministry to use these new capacities.

Khandouzi made the remarks in reference to the upcoming BRICS summit in Kazan which is the capital of Tatarstan of Russia. He also highlighted the growing cooperation between the Republic of Tatarstan and Iranian provinces, IRNA reported.

"In implementing the main policy of the Iranian president, which is to expand substantive relations with neighboring Russia, we follow this policy in a more special way regarding the Republic of Tatarstan", Khandouzi noted.

The minister also told Minnikhanov that another aspect of the importance of the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran

and Tatarstan is related to the role he would play during the BRICS summit in Kazan.

"As you know, Iran has recently started the process of joining this economic bloc, and in the Finance Ministry, we have started serious programs and measures to use the new capacities", he underlined in reference to the country officially joining BRICS in January.

Khandouzi also stressed the need for long-term and

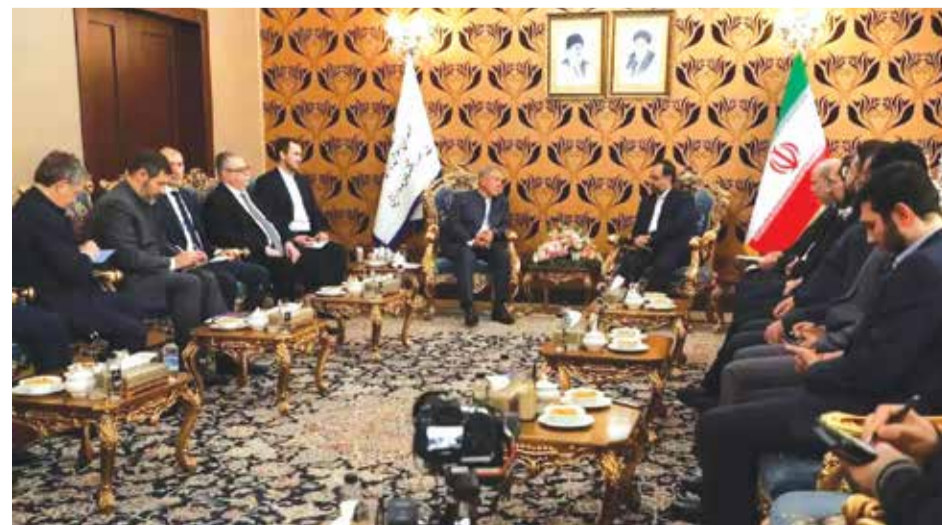
stable institution-building in order to make the most of this two-way capacity and hailed Minnikhanov for providing good help in this regard, especially for the opening of 'Mir Business Trade Center' and allowing Iranian companies in Tatarstan that he said would help boost bilateral relations.

Minnikhanov, for his part, appreciated the hospitality of the government and the people of Iran showed to

him and his accompanying delegation.

"The new situation in international relations makes us more in touch with each other," he pointed.

Referring to the cultural and religious commonalities between Iran and Tatarstan, he said that there are many areas for the growth of economic and cultural relations and that the two sides need to take necessary measures to use these capacities.



Iran, India hold first joint committee on agriculture

Iran and India held a joint agricultural committee to facilitate exports of agricultural products and address issues such as quarantine requirements and customs barriers. Agriculture and trade officials from the two countries took part in the first joint agricultural committee in New Delhi, months after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the sidelines of a BRICS summit, called for closer economic and trade ties in non-sanctioned sectors, IRNA reported.

Discussions centered around ways to promote agricultural cooperation between Iran and India and the necessity of conducting research on related topics such as herbal medicine, tropical fruits, greenhouse products, pesticides and disease control as well as tariffs and customs barriers.

During the meeting, the two sides put forth their proposals on how to develop relations in the agriculture sector and food industry.

The preliminary agreement on the joint committee was worked out in September, when Alireza Peyman-Pak, Iran's deputy Agriculture Minister in charge of trade and market regulation, visited New Delhi to discuss cooperation in the agriculture sector with Indian officials.

Enjoy diverse winter sports and activities in Kerman Province



Iranica Desk

Kerman Province rightfully holds the title of a four-season province, with a diverse climate and landscapes that cater to a wide range of activities throughout the year. While Shahdad experiences scorching temperatures of over 45 degrees in the summer, just 30 kilometers away, the mountain village of Sirch and other pleasant areas offer much cooler temperatures and snowy conditions in the winter, perfect for skiing.

The province's vast geography, as the largest in the country, features flat plains, deserts, and towering mountains, each with its unique ecosystem, providing an ideal environment for various activities, including winter sports.

This diversity extends beyond specific areas like Shahdad and Sirch. From the outskirts of Kerman, including Koochpayeh and Sekonj villages and others, to the cities of Lalehzar of Bardseer, a short dis-

tance from the province's center, one can experience winters with temperatures below negative 15 degrees Celsius, while enjoying summer weather free from the need for air conditioning.

Additionally, areas near Baft, Rabor, Sardouyeh, Delfard, and along the route between Bam and Jiroft, including Dehbakri and Jebalbareh villages, showcase a unique climate and diversity that rivals any well-known point in the country, despite being less recognized.

Even in the southern areas of the province, which have a warm and humid climate for about six months of the year, mountainous areas like the city of Darb-e Behesht in the Sardouyeh district of Jiroft experience cold and snowy winters, providing opportunities for winter sports.

In addition to the cold and mountainous regions, the desert and arid areas of Kerman Province, which are less suitable for tourism activities in the warm season, are considered ideal for travel and recre-

ational activities in the autumn and winter.

Contrary to the common perception of Kerman as a desert province, a significant portion of its area is comprised of mountains, and it is home to four peaks over four thousand meters, making it a suitable ground for mountain sports, including mountaineering.

One of these peaks is "Kuh-e Hazar," located 100 kilometers east of the province's center in Rayen, which is considered the highest in Kerman, with an elevation of 4,501 meters, measured precisely by GPS devices. It is the fourth largest mountain in Iran, the highest peak in the south of the country, and the roof of southern Iran.

Mountaineers ascend this peak by traveling to the city of Rayen in Kerman and climbing routes through Mirshadi, Ardikan and Bab Zangi villages and the Zar Roud path. Kuh-e Hazar has a concrete shelter at an altitude of 3,100 meters and a permanent spring up to this altitude.

Lalehzar Mountain

Lalehzar Mountain, situated in the northern region of Baft and 160 kilometers west of the center of Kerman Province, showcases cold, snowy winters and verdant, water-rich summers, adding to the allure of southeastern Iran's geography. The mountain's peak, with an elevation of 4,351 meters, stands as the province's second-highest summit.

The most favorable season for ascending Lalehzar Mountain is summer, while winter climbs pose significant challenges, necessitating complete equipment. In the vicinity of Lalehzar Mountain lies Shah Mountain (Kuh-e Shah), the province's third-highest peak, with an elevation of 4,349 meters.

Polvar Mountain

Polvar Mountain is situated around 45 kilometers from the city of Kerman, standing at an elevation of 4,233 meters. Its peak's resemblance to Mount Damavand's when viewed from the eastern front of the village of Jooshan has earned it the moniker "Kerman's Damavand," contributing to its popularity among Kermani mountaineers.

The ascent to Polvar Peak typically begins from the city of Mahan and the village of Darbar. Known for its technical challenges, including deep valleys, steep ridges, and renowned traverse routes, this mountain leaves a lasting impression on climbers. The optimal climbing season for this peak is from April to October, and during colder months, climbers must be equipped with complete winter gear, ropes, and support tools.

Apart from the aforementioned renowned peaks, Jupar, Golchin, and Sarmeshk peaks are also favored among mountaineers in Kerman Province, each offering a distinct and memorable mountaineering experience.

Ice climbing and skiing

Ice climbing in the desert of Kerman may seem surprising, but during the cold winter months, the sport comes alive, attracting numerous groups to suitable locations to engage in this exhilarating activity. The waterfalls in Kerman Province, due to the cold weather and freezing water, provide excellent conditions for this challenging yet enjoyable sport.

Bidehkhun Ice Cave

In Bidehkhun village, there is a natural ice cave that is considered a tourist attraction in the winter and early spring. According to the locals, it also has medicinal properties. Additionally, waterfalls like Rayen, Fosk, Simak, Khoshkar, and others become attractive spots for ice climbing during the cold season when their water freezes.

Skiing in Sirch

Sirch Ski Resort, located less than 50 kilometers from Shahdad, serves as the gateway to the Lut Desert and is the only ski resort in the southeast of the country, situated in the mountainous and tourist village of Sirch. The resort is located on the slopes of the Jofan Mountains in the village of Sirch. Skiing at this resort, like anywhere else, requires appropriate equipment, including boots, clothing, hats, goggles, and more, specifically designed for skiing. In recent years, other mountainous areas in Kerman Province, such as Baft and Rabor, which receive significant snowfall during the winter, have been considered suitable for building ski slopes and hosting winter sports. Although this year, the precipitation in these areas has been less than in previous years, it has not diminished their attractions and beauty.

Lut and Shahdad deserts

In recent years, the onset of autumn, particularly winter, and the favorable weather conditions in the desert regions of Kerman Province have created opportunities for sports activities. This pristine and captivating region is well-suited for a variety of sports. The Lut Desert, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the Shahdad Desert are among the most significant desert areas that draw in tourists and sports enthusiasts.

Shahdad, situated in the eastern part of the province, is approximately 100 kilometers from Kerman. It boasts historical and natural attractions. Off-roading, safari, hiking, and camel racing are some of the main sports activities that can be enjoyed in the Lut Desert during the cold seasons. In recent years, several marathon competitions have been organized in Shahdad Desert, attracting renowned runners from Iran and other parts of the world, adding a special excitement and appeal.

Sandboarding and climbing the sandy hills in the eastern areas of the province, such as Fahraj, Rigan, and Bam, also provide excellent opportunities for engaging in sports in the deserts of Kerman, which deserve more attention.

Sports in the Lut Desert, owing to its unique geographical location and UNESCO status, come with their own special conditions and considerations to ensure the preservation of this untouched and amazing desert area and the safety of individuals from potential hazards.

Hosting sports competitions in winter in Kerman not only showcases this ancient and beautiful land but also attracts more tourists from both domestic and international locations.

Lalehzar Mountain

Polvar Mountain

Bidehkhun Ice Cave

Sirch Ski Resort

Shahdad Desert

Everyone should be **scared as hell**

Democrats call for Trump-proofing NATO

By Joe Gould, Connor O'Brien & Paul McLeary
Defense reporters

OPINION

US Congress needs to take new steps to protect NATO after Donald Trump said he would “encourage” Russia to attack member countries that don’t meet their financial commitments, several Democratic senators said Monday.

The former president’s comments raised fresh concerns among NATO supporters that Trump could still dramatically undermine the pact without withdrawing if he returns to the White House next year.

And allies who have reassured themselves that Trump can’t do anything radical if re-elected need to be on watch.

“Everyone should be scared as hell,” said Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.). “Anybody who cares about American leadership, anyone who cares about protecting democracy, anybody who wants to take on authoritarians around the world should be scared to death by the fact that Donald Trump is telling us that if he was re-elected president, he would throw our NATO allies to [Vladimir] Putin.”

Lawmakers touted defense policy legislation signed into law in December that prevents any president from withdrawing the US from NATO without approval from the Senate or an act of Congress. Yet on Monday, Democrats acknowledged that the guardrail they threw up would have a limited effect on a president who is opposed to the alliance.

Trump, for example, could refuse to appoint a US ambassador to NATO headquarters in Brussels or order US military commanders to dial back exercises with their NATO counterparts. He could even refuse to come to a country’s aid if it’s attacked.

Those moves fall short of pulling Washington out of the alliance, but they would certainly show that the administration was walking away from key commitments in Europe.

“He could just downgrade our participation... he won’t go to summits and the secretary of defense won’t go to defense ministerials” at NATO, said Jim Townsend, a former Pentagon official who oversaw Europe and NATO policy. “US leadership will drop out, and you just won’t see a lot of American faces.”

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), who has pushed for legislation to guard against Trump deploying US troops on American soil in a possible second term, said it was time to start looking at ways, through legislation, to protect NATO from a future Trump presidency.

“I am petrified by the prospect that Donald Trump could reduce appropriations or otherwise, in effect if not word, withdraw American support from NATO. I think these comments are disastrous,” Blumenthal said in a brief interview.

“There are potentially other measures we can take, and we should begin exploring them immediately while we still have the unity of support for NATO.”

For Congress to hem in a commander in chief who wanted to pull back from the alliance would be “very difficult,” Senate Armed Services Committee Chair Jack Reed (D-R.I.) said Monday. That’s because so many of the ways the US contributes to NATO — including filling positions in Europe or NATO headquarters or keeping US troops stationed in Europe — are directed by the executive branch.

“What we have prevented with the language, which I think is important, is a total withdrawal, a formal withdrawal from NATO — so we’d still be in NATO, but the president would have so many different levers; our participation could be diminished significantly,” Reed said.

Trump’s track record on the issue also raises the specter of

a two-tiered approach to European countries: rewarding good behavior and abandoning those he wishes to punish.

Rose Gottemoeller, former NATO deputy secretary general during the Trump administration, pointed out that Trump’s call to pull thousands of US troops out of Germany over his anger with Berlin’s refusal to hike spending was tempered by his willingness to send more troops to Poland, which was — and continues to be — on a defense spending spree.

“The Poles were ‘paying to play’ with 2 percent of GDP, and he liked that [while then German Chancellor Angela Merkel] was refusing,” she said, “and he hated that.” Gottemoeller warned that “if he’s encouraging Putin to attack NATO now, however, I am not sure his head is in the same place.”

Kristine Berzina, a NATO expert at the German Marshall Fund, said if Trump gets creative, he can do plenty of damage.

“There’s so many layers to the kind of bad ally the US can be” to NATO, she said.

Article 5, where NATO allies pledge to help any member nation that has been attacked, remains open to interpretation. The response from treaty members is still dependent on individual governments deciding to act, and there is no penalty for inaction. If one member were attacked by Russia, and President Trump decided against coming to that country’s aid, there is little anyone could do to compel action.

If Trump refuses to send an ambassador to NATO or sends a representative more interested in breaking tables rather than reaching consensus, “I think you could see something potentially similar to what we currently see in Congress because each of the countries has an equal voice, technically, but the US is the most powerful of those voices, and there is a lot of deference to the US.”

“And so, it can very quickly become ineffectual,” she added. “For the US to be in NATO, it has to be actively in NATO, or else it becomes comatose.”

While Democrats expressed shock and

dismay at Trump’s remarks, Republicans were quick to downplay or defend them.

Several framed Trump’s comments as a push for NATO members to strengthen their defenses and waved off the idea his words would undermine the alliance.

Trump used the threat of pulling out of NATO or reducing troops in certain European countries to push member nations to commit to spending more on their own militaries during his presidency. NATO members agreed to the nonbinding goal of spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product on their defense as part of the 2014 Wales Summit, but only 11 countries have hit that benchmark.

For many Republicans, Trump’s comments were simply rhetoric aimed at cajoling Europe to pay more for its defense.

“The way I interpret that is he is asking NATO countries to step up and meet their financial obligations, but we’re obligated by the treaty to come to their defense, under Article 5, and so I would think that would be conclusive on that,” said Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas).

“I take everything Donald Trump says seriously, but I don’t take it literally,” Cornyn added.

Sen. Marco Rubio, who co-sponsored the NATO legislation with Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) to bar a president from unilaterally withdrawing from NATO, waved away Trump’s comments as the former president “approaching things like a businessman and negotiating a transaction.”

“I was here when he was president, and he didn’t undermine or destroy NATO,” Rubio said. “He did ask our allies to do more. He just asked very differently than other presidents, and they did the same thing.”

Sen. Thom Tillis (R-N.C.), said the Rubio-Kaine legislation was “helpful” and “wise”. He also expressed sympathy with Trump’s remarks as an effective expression of frustration with NATO allies not meeting their spending commitments.

“Thank goodness that Trump put pressure on NATO four years ago, six years ago because we are in a far better position to do what we’re doing as a NATO entity today that we weren’t before,” Tillis said. “And so, hey, if the rhetoric worked and it’s putting some people on notice, then maybe I’ll cut him some slack and let him keep on using that rhetoric.”

For Armed Services Chair Reed, there’s still one extremely effective solution. “We can make sure he’s not president again,” he said.

The article first appeared on Politico.

Insurrectionists loyal to former US president Donald Trump rally at the Capitol in Washington on January 6, 2021.
JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP





US President Joe Biden (L) waits to speak at the Biden campaign headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, on February 3, 2024, with first lady Jill Biden by his side.
ALEX BRANDON/AP

Trump steps up, helping Biden just when President needs him

By Peter Baker
Chief White House correspondent for NYT
OPINION

If anyone gets a thank-you note from President Biden for helping get him out of a jam in recent days, it should probably be former president Donald J. Trump. Just when Mr. Biden was swamped by unwelcome questions about his age, his predecessor and challenger stepped in, rescuing him with an ill-timed diatribe vowing to “encourage” Russia to attack NATO allies that do not spend enough on their militaries.

The stunner from Mr. Trump over the weekend not only drew attention away from the president’s memory problems, as detailed in a special counsel report, but also provided a convenient way for Mr. Biden’s defenders to reframe the issue: Yes, they could now say, the incumbent may be an old man who sometimes forgets things, but his challenger is both aging and dangerously reckless.

It was not the first time, nor likely will it be the last, that Mr. Trump has stepped up when an adversary was in trouble to provide an escape route with an ill-considered howler of his own. Mr. Trump’s lifelong appetite for attention has often collided with his evident best interest. For Mr. Biden, that may be the key to this year’s campaign, banking on his opponent’s inability to stay silent at critical moments and hoping that he keeps reminding voters why they rejected him in 2020.

“There’s a saying that the enemy of your enemy is your friend,” said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist who worked on the 2016 presidential campaign of Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who lost the party nomination that year to Mr. Trump. “Since Trump is his own worst enemy, he’s arguably Biden’s best friend.”

That does not mean that age is no longer a political liability for Mr. Biden, who at 81 is already the oldest president in American history and would be 86 at the end of a second term. While Mr. Trump is close behind him at 77, the special counsel’s characterization of the president as a “well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory” proved searing and damaging.

A new poll by ABC News and Ipsos released on Sunday found that 86 percent of Americans think Mr. Biden is too old to serve another term as president, while 62 percent consider Mr. Trump too old. But in Washington, the traditional political strategy when under fire is to change the sub-

ject as quickly as possible. Mr. Biden’s team set out to make the real issue not his own capacity but the conduct of the special counsel, Robert K. Hur, just as past presidents like Mr. Trump and Bill Clinton have sought to redirect attention from allegations against them to the prosecutors who investigated them.

White House surrogates and friends flooded the airwaves in the days afterward to assail Mr. Hur for citing the president’s inability to remember key dates, including the year of the death of his son Beau. In a fund-raising appeal, Jill Biden, the first lady, denounced Mr. Hur’s “inaccurate and personal political attacks about Joe,” and then asked supporters for money. The pushback might not persuade voters already opposed to Mr. Biden, but it gave Democrats something else to talk about.

Mr. Trump played right into the Biden camp’s strategy during a rally in South Carolina on Saturday by castigating “delinquent” NATO members and saying that not only would he not come to their defense if attacked by the Russians, but he would also encourage the Russians “to do whatever the hell they want” against such allies.

“Donald Trump can’t help himself,” said Rodell Mollineau, a Democratic strategist and Partner at ROKK Solutions. “He will always try to turn the focus to him, even when it’s not in his advantage to do so. I expect many more hold-my-beer moments from Trump before this election is over.”

Nikki Haley, the former UN ambassador and South Carolina

governor, who is still trying to wrest the Republican nomination away from the front-running Mr. Trump, seized on that penchant to bolster her case that the party should not trust him to lead it to victory this fall. “That’s what you’re going to get, is unhinged chaos,” Ms. Haley said on Fox News. “And that only makes Joe Biden,” she added, “sound sane. When you get Donald Trump making Joe Biden sound sane, it’s more of the reason why Donald Trump can’t defeat Joe Biden. They’re taking everything he’s saying and they’re going to use it against him.”

Mr. Biden’s camp certainly sought to do just that. The White House released a statement saying that “encouraging invasions of our closest allies by murderous regimes is appalling and unhinged”. In a separate statement released by his campaign, Mr. Biden said Mr. Trump’s comments were “predictable coming from a man who is promising to rule as a dictator.”

Robert Gibbs, a former White House press secretary to President Barack Obama, said the latest episode proved that Mr. Trump was incapable of heeding an old political adage: “If your opponent is having a bad day, simply get out of the way and let it happen.”

For Mr. Biden, he said, such out-of-the-blue opportunities may prove decisive. “The dexterity of the president and his team to drive those moments is going to be maybe one of the big determining factors as to who wins this race.”

The article first appeared on the New York Times.

Trump’s potential re-election, Europe’s looming crisis

By Huseyin Ozdemir
Researcher at TRT
World Research Centre

OPINION

Europe is on the brink of uncertainty again. Former United States president Donald Trump’s likely return to the American presidency could unsettle the continent as never before. The European landscape today starkly differs from its history of robust leadership, now mirroring a disjointed chorus grappling with challenges that jeopardize the continent’s cohesion. The departure of influential leaders, exemplified by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s exit from the political stage just three months prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, highlights a growing concern over the absence of decisive leadership within Europe itself. Many European Union (EU) strategic partners, which could provide leadership, such as the United Kingdom, Norway, and Türkiye, are NATO members but remain outside the union. Moreover, the EU’s strength relies on its capacity to collaborate effectively. This internal configuration entails swiftly reaching a consensus on every issue. However, the EU’s current state does not inspire much confidence. European leaders, who have struggled to build consensus on critical matters like supporting Ukraine, addressing immigration, and responding to Israel’s War on Gaza, will face even tougher tests if Trump is elected.

EU’s burden: Russia-Ukraine war

Amid the vigorous debates surrounding NATO’s effectiveness in the post-Cold War era, the Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent support extended by NATO member countries breathed new life into the alliance, with US President Joe Biden’s full commitment to the transatlantic alliance extracting it from the catacombs of uncertainty. At that juncture, NATO countries demonstrated unity and transatlantic cooperation. Even historically neutral nations like Finland and Sweden expressed interest in joining NATO.

Ukraine’s territorial integrity. While Europe may still attempt to aid Ukraine, such efforts would likely be superfluous and provoke a clash with Trump. While some European governments could still advocate for ongoing support for Ukraine, others may refrain from contradicting Trump’s position. The three major European donors to Ukraine — Germany, the UK, and Norway — are all NATO members, with only Germany being a member of the EU. While Germany is an economic giant, it is a military midget, and, thus, it cannot compensate for the void left by the US. If Ukraine

“Europeans must seize their destiny”

By supporting the EU after Brexit, the Biden administration delayed the progress of far-right parties in Germany and Italy. However, Trump’s potential re-election would likely have the contrary effect.

As Merkel aptly stated, Europeans must seize their destiny. The Ukraine conflict, fundamentally a European matter, demands proactive measures, not passivity. Among the swift actions needed is to address potential security gaps arising from a diminished US defense umbrella under



NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg (front center left) speaks with then-US president Donald Trump (front center right) after a group photo at a NATO leaders meeting in Watford, England, on December 4, 2019.
FRANCISCO SECO/AP

If Trump wins, this means the US would focus on the Asia-Pacific rather than Europe. Trump would not withdraw from NATO but would refrain from implementing Article 5, raising concerns about NATO’s cohesion and togetherness. This possibility stems from Trump’s criticisms of the EU for not adequately supporting NATO’s financial burdens despite the alliance’s resurgence since February 2022.

For the EU, which has leaned for its defense on NATO for the past 79 years, waning American support would be a disaster. Even more concerning is Trump’s pledge to resolve the bloody war between Ukraine and Russia in a single day, which entails an agreement likely to result in Ukraine ceding territory. This scenario would be humiliating for the EU, which staunchly defended

is forced to accept the loss of territory, the EU would still have a few years to adapt to this new reality.

Russia would require several years to rebuild its worn-out army and economy, during which it would pose less of a direct threat to the EU, giving the EU time to bolster its defenses. Unlike Russia, which has long relied on a war economy system, the EU faces a different economic landscape. This situation is what led Trump to declare that he would not support European defense in the first place. For Europe, this new environment would imply shifting funds from social welfare toward the defense industry. It would also signal a potential increase in far-right extremism, which has already been on the rise in Europe in recent years, gaining even more traction in the upcoming European elections in June.

Trump.

While American voters might grow weary of Ukraine, Europeans cannot afford such a luxury. This reality is another wake-up call for Europe that the old continent cannot afford to entrust its collective security to the whims of American voters. Developing an independent defense policy must be a priority before the November elections. Europe cannot afford to be caught unprepared again, like with Brexit and Trump’s previous presidency. By taking charge and implementing rapid, strategic policies, Europe can navigate the uncertainties ahead and ensure its security and stability. However, this can only be achieved with strong European leaders, a condition that is inexistent today.

The article first appeared on Anadolu Agency.



Iranian players celebrate a shootout victory over Spain in the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup opener in Dubai, UAE, on February 15, 2024.
● FIFA

Beach Soccer World Cup: 'Never-say-die attitude' seals winning start for Iran

Sports Desk

Iranian Mohammad Mokhtari believes his team's "never-say-die attitude" was key to the comeback victory over Spain in their FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup opener in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. Mokhtari was the hero of the night for Iran as he bagged four goals and delivered a Player-of-the-Match performance as the reigning Asian champions defeated the 2013 finalists 3-1 in the shootout following a 6-6 thriller at the Dubai Design District Stadium on Thursday.

In what will go down as an instant classic in the recent history of the competition, La Roja found the net with two seconds into the contest through David Ardil and took a 3-0 lead by the 10th minute, before Moslem Mesigar pulled one back and Mokhtari reduced the deficit to one after the interval. The Spaniards still thought they had done enough for maximum points when Jose Arias made it 5-2 in the second period but Mokhtari had other ideas as he scored three more goals to force the game into extra time before

Reza Amiri gave Iran a first lead of the night after the restart. However, Chicky's strike with two seconds left on the clock ensured a shootout ending to the match, in which Ali Mirshekari, Movahed Mohammadpour, and Amir Akbari capitalized from the spot, with Mahdi Mirjalili denying Chicky to seal the triumph for Ali Naderi's men. "We're over the moon," Mokhtari told FIFA.com after the match. "We're relieved as well. It's not often you're losing 3-0 and 5-2 in a World Cup and you come back to

win. Yet alone against a team like Spain. "But we always believed we could do it. Our coach kept telling us we could do it. I think that's one of our assets: Our never-say-die attitude." "We followed exactly what our coach told us," Mesigar said. "He kept telling us we could win the game. We didn't panic and change our game plan. Our coach told us to keep doing what we were doing, we followed his orders, and here we are with the victory. "Iran will never give up. When you

wear this shirt, you never give up." Mokhtari deflected the plaudits post-match, insisting "it was a team effort and every one of us gave it everything," but his captain disagreed. "Mokhtari is a rare genius in beach soccer," said Mesigar. "Today was just another day of him pulling off heroics. He's scored four goals against Spain. He's showed once again why he is one of the best players in the world." It was also milestone night for the Iranian skipper, who, along with Spain's Dana, set a new record for

the longest time between their first and last World Cup appearances with 17 years. Portugal legend Belchior had held the record at 16 years. Iran will be back in action today in Group B against Argentina, which fell to a 4-3 defeat against Tahiti earlier on Thursday. Tahiti, a two-time runner-up in the competition, is top of the table with three points, with Iran in second on one. The top two of each of the four groups will progress to the quarterfinals with the final showdown set to be staged on February 25.

Klinsmann sacked by South Korea



● AFP

BBC - Jurgen Klinsmann has been sacked as head coach of South Korea after just 12 months in the role and following the country's Asian Cup semi-final defeat. South Korea lost 2-0 to Jordan in the Asian Cup, prolonging the country's 64-year wait for the title. Fans, politicians and the Korean media had called for the German to be sacked after their semi-final exit in Qatar and there were also reports of in-fighting between top players during the tournament. "Coach Klinsmann failed to demonstrate leadership that we expected from the national team coach, including game management, player management and work attitude, which elevate the competitiveness of the national team," said KFA President Chung Mong-gyu.

AFC Champions League last 16:

Sepahan's Morais rues red card in late collapse against Al Hilal

Sports Desk

Sepahan manager Jose Morais said his side's home defeat against Saudi giant Al Hilal in the first leg of the AFC Champions League last-16 tie was down to Mohammad Daneshgar's late red card in Isfahan on Thursday. The game in front of a capacity crowd of 70,000 at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium looked set for a 1-1 stalemate but the Saudi Pro League leaders made the most of the center-back's sending off 14 minutes from normal time, finding the net twice in stoppage time to take a 3-1 win into next week's rematch in Riyadh. A VAR intervention convinced the Kuwaiti referee to show Daneshgar his marching orders for a high tackle on Abdullah Al Hamddan's shin. Iranian international Ramin Rezaeian gave the home side a 37th-minute lead but Al Hilal's recruitments in a summer of spending spree eventually made the difference as Brazilian Malcom drew the visitors level 12 minutes after the break and Serbian striker Aleksandar Mitrović headed home in the fourth minute of added time for



Al Hilal's Malcom (L) is seen in action against Sepahan winger Farshad Ahmadzadeh in the first leg of the AFC Champions League last 16 at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on February 15, 2024.
● ARYA JAFARI/AFC

his 26th goal of the season. Saudi star Salem Al Dawasari then played Al Hamddan through the middle before his composed finish rounded off a precious away triumph for Al Hilal in the 97th minute. "The only weakness we had was

the red card. I did not see any other weaknesses. Defensive organization is our main strength but I must say conceding the second goal was a surprise as we were defending with nine players to Al Hilal's five," a frustrated Morais said after the match.

"We played against a very good team. With one less player, we will definitely face challenges. We suffered and sacrificed ourselves. Sometimes we didn't make the right decisions, but we played a good game before the dismissal.

"We had many chances but we didn't score, but it's not over yet." Meanwhile, Morais's fellow Portuguese and opposite number on Al Hilal bench Jorge Jesus said his side deserved the victory. "We won because we were better and we deserved this win. Congratulations to my players," said Jesus. "It is a good advantage and with respect to our opponents, we will continue to play our game and I want to win again." Jesus said believed the late introduction of Mohammed Al Burayk and Al Hamddan turned the tide for Saudi side, which is chasing a record-extending fifth trophy in the Asian elite clubs' competition. "The target was to send on players who are faster and the two of them changed the game. "The first half was a bit difficult, but we still created a couple of chances. In the second half we showed our strength and the game became difficult for Sepahan, especially after they had a player sent off." The two teams meet again next Thursday with the winners to face either Uzbekistan's Navbahor or Al Ittihad FC of Saudi Arabia in the quarterfinals.

Lebanon files complaint with UNSC over Israeli strikes



in hostilities in the south is "extremely concerning." "The loss of innocent life is lamentable. The rules of war are clear: Parties must protect civilians and these rules must be upheld. They are not a target," Riza said in a statement. At least 39 civilians have reportedly been killed in southern Lebanon in the last four months, according to the UN Human Rights Office. The Lebanese resistance group Hezbollah has promised to retaliate for Wednesday's strikes, stating that Israel would pay "the price" for killing 10 people, including five children in southern Lebanon. "The enemy will pay the price for these crimes," Hezbollah politician Hassan Fadlallah told Reuters. "The resistance will continue to practice its legitimate

one of the war-torn Palestinian territory's few operating hospitals that had been raided by Israeli forces. "A fifth patient at Nasser hospital was martyred as a result of the stopping of generators that caused a cut in oxygen supply," the ministry said in a statement, raising fears for four other patients admitted at the hospital's intensive care unit and three children in a nursery. Israel faced renewed calls from key ally the US on Friday against launching a large-scale attack on Gaza's southern city of Rafah, where nearly 1.5 million Palestinians are trapped. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted he would push ahead with a "powerful" operation in the overcrowded city to achieve "complete victory" over Hamas.

Fresh calls against Rafah attack

The White House said that President Joe Biden had spoken by phone with Netanyahu late Thursday, urging him not to carry out an attack on Rafah without a plan to keep civilians safe.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been driven into Rafah, seeking shelter in a sprawling makeshift encampment near the Egyptian border.

The city now hosts more than half of Gaza's population, with displaced people "crammed" into less than 20 percent of the territory, according to OCHA.

AFP, REUTERS, Anadolu Agency, and Press TV contributed to this report.



Hezbollah fighters and supporters attend the funeral of one of the group's commanders killed by an Israeli air raid in Lebanon's southern city of Nabatieh on February 16, 2024. MAHMOUD ZAYYAT/AFP

International Desk

Lebanon's permanent mission to the UN has filed a formal complaint before the UN Security Council following the death of at least 10 civilians in two Israeli airstrikes in the south of the country. Addressing the rotating President of the Security Council Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett, the mission noted that the strikes against civilians amount to "war crime". "While international humanitarian law guarantees

protection of civilians and civilian facilities, Israel's deliberate and direct bombing of civilians in their homes is considered a violation of international humanitarian law and amounts to a war crime," reads the complaint. An Israeli strike knocked down part of a building in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatieh on Wednesday, killing seven members of the same family, including a child, Lebanon's official National News Agency said. A boy initially reported missing was found alive under

the rubble. In a separate Israeli attack, a woman and her two children were killed in the village of as-Sawana in southern Lebanon. The complaint added that the airstrikes are "considered a violation of Lebanon's sovereignty, as well as safety of its lands and citizens." The attacks "breach upon all United Nations resolutions that require Israel to stop its violations of Lebanon's sovereignty and end its occupation of Lebanese lands, including Resolution 1701

(2006)," the mission added. Meanwhile, a UN spokesman, Stephane Dujarric, said Thursday that escalating hostilities in southern Lebanon have displaced more than 88,000 residents. He added that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 60,000 people remain in border villages highly affected by exchanges of fire. Humanitarian Coordinator in Lebanon, Imran Riza, said Thursday that a recent surge

right to defend its people," he pointed out.

The border tension comes amid an Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip that has killed more than 28,775 people following an attack by the Palestinian resistance group Hamas on Oct. 7 last year.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Friday the toll includes 112 fatalities over the past 24 hours, while 68,552 people have been wounded in Gaza.

It said five patients died Friday due to lack of oxygen at

130 journalists killed in Israel's war on Gaza

International Desk

The number of journalists killed in Gaza rose to 130 since the start of Israel's onslaught on the Palestinian territory following the death of two more reporters. The government media office in Gaza in a statement named the two journalists as Zaid Abu Zayed and Yasser Mamdouh. Zayed was killed in the bombing of a house in the Nuseirat camp, along with his wife and children, while

Mamdouh was killed by Israeli snipers in the Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 99 journalists were killed worldwide in 2023, making those 12 months the deadliest for the media in almost a decade. The Palestinian victims account for nearly 75 percent of all journalists killed worldwide. Killings of reporters would have dropped globally year-

on-year had it not been for the deaths in the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza, the CPJ said in its annual report released on Thursday. "This war is unprecedented in terms of the threat to journalists," Jodie Ginsberg, president of the CPJ, told Al Jazeera from New York. "What's important to remember about this war is that Gazan journalists are the only journalists able to report on what's happening inside Gaza. International journalists have not been



able to get in, have not been allowed in, except on very, very controlled trips that are overseen by the Israeli army. "So we are entirely reliant on those [Palestinian]

journalists, who are risking their lives to bring us this story," she added. The CPJ has previously attacked the "persecution" of journalists by Israeli forces and is investigating whether

er a dozen journalists killed in the Gaza conflict were deliberately targeted by Israeli soldiers, which would constitute a war crime.

Journalists in Gaza have been killed covering the war and sheltering from it. Some have died with their colleagues; others, with their families.

They tried to report any way they could, recording scenes of carnage and rare moments of calm through photos, videos and social media posts. The images they left behind — or the words they didn't know would be their last — allowed a glimpse into the lives of besieged Palestinians in a devastating war.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Iran, Saudi Arabia push for OIC emergency meeting on Gaza

The foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia weighed plans for an emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to address the heinous crimes the Zionist regime is committing against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. In a telephone conversation on Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud called for concerted efforts to end the Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, Tasnim News Agency reported.

Pointing to his diplomatic efforts, including his recent negotiations with the secretary general of OIC, Amir-Abdollahian said he has proposed the idea of holding an emergency meeting of OIC foreign ministers to address the Gaza crisis. The top Saudi diplomat welcomed the proposal for the emergency meeting on plans to stop the Israeli regime's genocidal crimes in Gaza and the West Bank. The two sides agreed to hold further consultations with the other foreign ministers about the issue.

The Iranian foreign minister lashed out at the US for sponsoring the Zionist crimes in Gaza and giving Israel the green light for strikes on Rafah. "We do not regard war as the solution, but if a political solution is not found immediately, the negative consequences of continuation of acts of genocide by the Israeli regime for regional security and stability will be inevitable," he warned. For his part, the Saudi minister denounced Israel's disregard for international calls for the cessation of war.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Tehran ready to ensure Caucasus security



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi welcomed peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, expressing Tehran's readiness to guarantee security in the Caucasus region.

In a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia Mher Grigoryan on Thursday, Raisi expressed Iran's opposition to the presence of outsiders in the region, Tasnim News Agency reported.

"We do not agree with the presence of outsiders in the region under the pretext of solving problems, and we believe that their presence will not only not solve the problems, but will become a bigger problem for the nations and governments of the region," he said.

Tensions between the two Caucasus neighbors have remained high since Baku re-captured the Armenian-populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh last September in a lightning military offensive.

Iran firm on constructing barrier along Afghanistan border



International Desk

The commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Forces said on Friday that construction of a barrier along the Afghanistan border is one of the most important projects of the country.

Brigadier General Kiumars Heydari said that the construction of barriers like walls and fences is common in all countries, and no one can protest.

Heydari underlined that other countries cannot interfere in Iran's plans to construct a barrier.

Heydari's comments came in reaction to remarks by Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, who had said earlier that Afghanistan is safe and poses no threat to any country, claiming that construction of barriers at the border should be coordinated with Kabul.

Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi confirmed earlier in the month Iran's plans to erect a barrier along the border with Afghanistan.

First Iranian Music Night held in Riyadh

Arts & Culture Desk

In a cultural initiative aimed at improving ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Ambassador to Riyadh Alireza Enayati, expressed hope for diverse cultural programs in the future. He made the statement during the Iranian Music Night held in Riyadh on February 15, IRNA wrote. The cultural event marks the first of its kind organized by the Iranian Embassy in Riyadh, coinciding with the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Enayati talked about the significance of arts and culture, adding that both countries have a lot of cultural and re-

ligious commonalities. "Cultural weeks, music nights, film screenings, and literary events are usual cultural activities hosted by embassies or cultural representatives during national occasions", the envoy said. Over the past four decades, Iran has consistently organized special cultural, and religious programs, particularly during the national and Islamic celebrations, he added. These events have always been welcomed by official authorities, local citizens, diplomats from other countries, and Iranians residing abroad. The musical ensemble "Soroush Molana," sponsored

by the Iranian Embassy in Riyadh, performed pieces of traditional Iranian music at the Palace of Culture amphitheater in Riyadh. He stressed the "richness of Iranian arts and culture", expressing hope for a future filled with diverse cultural programs between the two countries. Led by tar virtuoso Hossein Sojoudi, the ensemble staged a repertoire of 10 Iranian musical pieces. Abbas Rahbarnia was the vocalist of the program and Ali Kheshtinejad staged pieces on tar and kamancheh (an Iranian spiked fiddle). Mohammad Sarbaz also performed some daf (Persian frame drum) pieces.



Isfahan unveils tourist map catering to Chinese visitors



Arts & Culture Desk

A specialized tourist map of Isfahan has been unveiled in both Chinese and English languages on the sidelines of the 17th International Exhibition of Tourism and Related Industries in Tehran. The map's design includes symbols, signs, and colors tailored to the preferences of Chinese visitors, ISNA reported. Alireza Massah, the head of the tourism department of the cultural, social, and sport organization of Isfahan Municipality explained, "The map is designed to match the preferences of Chinese visitors, using elements such as miniature arts with designs from various historical periods and carefully chosen colors appealing to the Chinese taste." On the motivation behind publishing the map in Chinese, Massah pointed out that nearly 60,000 Chinese tourists have visited Isfahan since the beginning of the current Iranian year (from March 21, 2023), according to the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism

Department in Isfahan Province. He added that there has been a lack of corresponding content in Chinese, prompting the plan to introduce the key attractions of Isfahan in a map. Massah added, "The printed version of this map serves as a unique souvenir of Isfahan due to its special design. The content of the map will be available on the Chinese Baidu search engine in the next phase." According to the head of the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Department in Isfahan Province, Hamidreza Mohaqeqian, printed copies of the map will be distributed to airline agencies, hotels, and tourist offices representing Iran in China, aiming to provide Chinese tourists and travelers with easy access to information about Isfahan. Mohaqeqian also talked about the significance of the Chinese tourist market, adding, "Considering the number of foreign tourists entering Isfahan, Chinese tourists rank first among international visitors choosing Isfahan as their travel destination."

Lawmaker: 97% of medical needs produced domestically despite sanctions



Despite sanctions, 97% of the country's pharmaceutical needs are domestically produced. The restrictions on pharmaceuticals imposed by the United States violate human rights internationally in Iran, said a member of Health and Medical Commission of Iranian Parliament. In an interview with Iran Daily reporter, Fatemeh Mohammadbeigi urged for "modernization" in the country's pharmaceutical industry. She emphasized that sanctions have created challenges in the supply of essential raw materials for pharmaceutical companies and the modernization of drug production lines in the country. The Parliament member added that although the latest and most advanced drug production machinery is available globally, Iran faces difficulties importing even a single required device due to imposed sanctions. "This situation significantly impacts the quality and pricing of the finished pharmaceutical products." She highlighted. She stated that the 3% percent of medications which are not produced domestically, create many problems because they include vital medications for refractory diseases. Mohammadbeigi said although Iran's pharmaceutical productions are being exported to some countries, the current priority is to meet domestic market demands. The government has been proactive in ensuring the country's "pharmaceutical self-sufficiency", she said. She emphasized the importance of giving more attention

to knowledge-based companies in improving drug production quality and exports. Many such companies have been established in the country, employing numerous young and talented researchers, requiring government support and facilitation. Regarding the management of pharmaceutical companies, Mohammadbeigi urged better examination by government and regulatory teams. Attention should be given to the composition of the boards of directors in these companies to prevent malpractices, hoarding, and price manipulation. One of the country's pharmaceutical challenges, according to Mohammadbeigi, is the pricing of pharmaceutical items and tariff

discussions for pharmaceutical services. The rise of online platforms for buying and selling drugs has led to "market imbalances", she notified. Despite efforts by the Health and Treatment Commission and the Electronic Health Committee, illicit drug trading outside the health system continues. Mohammadbeigi stressed the need for stricter surveillance mechanisms, strong regulatory actions against offenders, and the prevention of any misconduct. She highlighted the importance of comprehensive management and determination in organizing the pharmaceutical market in the country. Mohammadbeigi urged all offi-

cials and organizations to share the responsibility, emphasizing that it should not only rest on the Health Ministry. To this end, the Health and Treatment Commission organized sessions with officials from the Central Bank, Health Ministry, and the Plan and Budget Organization to address budgetary and currency shortcomings in drug supply and production. Mohammadbeigi called for the country's banking system to provide "low-interest facilities" for the renovation of pharmaceutical production lines. In terms of raw material supply for pharmaceutical companies, she urged custom offices to speed up the clearance process, as delays in clearing pharmaceutical raw materials can slow down production lines and affect drug circulation, leaving people in need without essential medications, she explained.

