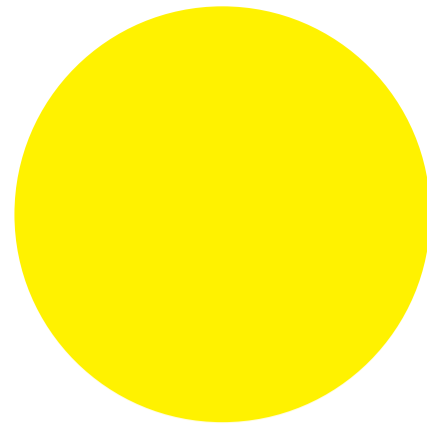


Iran, Azerbaijan open joint dam on border river

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Iran Daily



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IranDailyWeb

Vol. 7562 • Monday, May 20, 2024 • Ordibehesht 31, 1403 • Dhu al-Qadah 11, 1445 • 100,000 rials • 8 pages

National Desk

A helicopter carrying Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi made a “hard landing” on Sunday as it was crossing a mountainous area through a heavy fog.

The president and his entourage were flying back from a visit to a border area in the northwestern province of East Azarbaijan.

The incident happened in the mountainous protected forest area of Dizmar near the town of Varzaghan.

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi told state TV that 40 search teams had been dispatched to the region but poor weather made it difficult for them to reach the crash site.

Traveling with Raisi were Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the governor general of East Azarbaijan, and other officials and bodyguards.

His convoy included three helicopters. The other two have “reached their destination safely,” according to Tasnim News Agency.

Raisi, 63, was visiting the province where he inaugurated a dam together with his Azeri counterpart, Ilham Aliiev, on the border between the two countries.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei expressed concern about the incident and urged people to pray for the wellbeing of president and other people onboard the aircraft. The Leader also assured the nation that there would be “no disruption” in the management of the country in the wake of the incident.

People gathered in Shia holy shrines in Mashhad, Qom and Shiraz to pray for those onboard the copter.

Mohsen Mansouri, a presidential executive deputy, told Iranian TV that they had made contact with two people onboard the helicopter.

Iraqi government spokesman Bassem al-Awadi said in a statement the country’s Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani had “ordered the Interior Ministry, the Iraqi Red Crescent, and other relevant authorities to offer Iran the available resources to aid in the search for the Iranian president’s aircraft.”

Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan offered to help Iran with the search operation.

The European Union activated its Copernicus satellite system to offer emergency mapping services to help Iranian officials gain better visibility of the area where the crash is believed to have occurred, according to the bloc’s chief for crisis management, Janez Lenarcic. He said the EU had done so after a request for assistance by Iran. Several Iranian officials have lost their lives in air mishaps in past decades.

Back in 2006, then-commander of the ground forces of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps and 12 other people died after a small jet crashed in the northwestern city of Urmia.

Rahman Dadman, Iran’s transport minister under former president Mohammad Khatami, also died in a plane crash in northern Iran in May 2001. The plane was carrying 10 crew and 19 passengers, including six lawmakers.



Iran Prays for President After Chopper Crash-landed



Nearly 100 petchem complexes operating across Iran:

NPC



More than 97 petrochemical facilities are operating across Iran, said Morteza Shahmirzaei, the head of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC).

The official referred to the growth in Iran's petrochemical industry, adding that there were only six petrochemical complexes in the country when the 1979 Islamic Revolution toppled former Shah and the Islamic Republic was founded 45 years ago.

Noting that the country produces some 550 different types of petrochemical products, he said that each one of these products helps the development of a part of the Iranian industry.

He expected that Iran's petrochemical output will reach 100 million metric tons (mt) by the end of the current calendar year to March 2025.

Shahmirzaei had earlier said NPC is planning to complete 13 new petrochemical projects by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (late March 2025).

"One of the strategies of the petrochemical industry in the year "production leap with people's participation" is to put 12 new petrochemical projects into operation by the end of [the current Iranian calendar] 1403 and use all available capacities," the official said.

He stated that the completion of 12 petrochemical projects by the end of this year will have a significant impact on the growth of production and economic development of the country.

The NPC head had previously put the country's petrochemical production capacity at over 92 million tons, and said: "Today we are almost self-sufficient in the main petrochemical sectors including products and equipment."

Iran's petrochemical industry accounts for 28 percent of the region's petrochemical capacity and 2.7 percent of the world's petrochemical capacity, he announced.

The petrochemical industry plays a crucial role in Iran's non-oil economy, as petrochemical export is the second-largest source of revenue for the country after crude oil. Petrochemical exports already constitute nearly 33 percent of the country's non-oil exports.

According to Shahmirzaei, the company plans to increase its annual petrochemical production capacity to 200 million tons over the next 10 years.

Iran, Azerbaijan open joint dam on border river



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev inaugurated a dam constructed jointly by the two neighboring states on the Aras River at their common border.

The Qiz Qalasi dam, which represents the largest joint water project between Iran and Azerbaijan, was put into operation at a ceremony attended by the two heads of state on Sunday.

The embankment dam is located in the Khoda Afarin region in Iran's northwestern province of East Azarbaijan.

The project, with a ca-

capacity of 62 million cubic meters, will reportedly supply water to the irrigation and drainage networks of Khoda Afarin County.

Known as the biggest water project in Iran's northwestern border areas, the Qiz Qalasi dam is estimated to regulate 2 billion cubic meters of water every year.

A hydroelectric power station coupled with the dam is projected to generate 270 megawatt hours of electricity per annum.

Iranian Minister of Energy Ali Akbar Mehrabian has described the Qiz Qalasi dam as a symbol of friendship between

the people of Iran and Azerbaijan.

The dam has been constructed according to the latest and most modern engineering standards, he added.

Stronger relations

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, Raisi said relations with Azerbaijan are stronger than just two neighbors.

"As Leader of the Islamic Revolution [Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei] said our relationship with the friendly, brotherly and neighboring country of Azerbaijan goes beyond neighborliness. Our relationship is a strong kinship bond

that has roots in the beliefs of the two nations ... and connects our history and civilization," he said.

"This heartfelt relationship between the two nations is unbreakable." The Iranian chief executive also noted that Tehran-Baku ties should expand to regional and international cooperation.

He further warned that enemies do not want to see progress in Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic.

"Some may not be happy with the bond between Iran and Azerbaijan, but what is important to us

is the interests of the two nations and the two countries.

"Iran believes that any progress in Azerbaijan is its own progress and that any insecurity along the common border will damage both states."

Aliyev, for his part, said that the meeting between the Iranian and Azeri presidents has a message for the region and the world.

No one can create misunderstanding and division between two countries, he emphasized, describing developing bilateral relations as positive.

Speaking at the inaugural ceremony Minister

of Energy of Azerbaijan Parviz Shahbazov said that the project shows strengthening economic and political relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, which can solve many problems and remove economic obstacles.

Qiz Qalasi Dam brings about equalizing the resources of two countries on both sides of the Aras River and is considered a transnational project for both countries, he added.

The ecological importance of the project for the people of the two countries and regions cannot be ignored either, he noted.

Tech-based products unveiled in medical equipment field

Sixteen technology-based and technological products in the health sector including medical equipment and machinery were unveiled at a ceremony attended by Iran's Vice-President for Science and Technology Rouhollah Dehqani and the head of Iranian Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The products were unveiled Saturday on the

sidelines of the inaugural ceremony of the 25th International Exhibition of Medical, Dental, Laboratory and Pharmaceutical Equipment dubbed "Iran Health Expo 2024", Tasnim News Agency reported.

Digital radiology device, quantitative luminance kit, disposable elastomeric injection pump, ventilator, cardiac femoral, non-reinforced aor-

ta cannula, anesthesia machine, pulsed suction, hard medical contact lens, smart cuff device, infant humidifier chamber, household electrocardiograph (ECG) and addition diagnostic kits are the knowledge-based products unveiled in this exhibition.

More than 700 companies including 200 foreign guests are taking part in the exhibition within the framework of the business, technological, scientific and academic delegations.

Holding more than 60 specialized meetings in the field of interaction between businesses and showcasing the latest technological and innovative achievements of companies in the health sector are among the main programs in this exhibition.

The Iran Health Expo 2024 will run until May 21.



Annual gas supply to power stations up 11%

Gas supply to Iran's power plants increased by 11 percent in the previous Iranian year (ended on March 19) compared to corresponding figure for its preceding year, announced Head of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) Dispatching Department Saeed Aqili.

According to Aqili, the NIGC supplied 79 billion cubic meters of natural gas to the power plants across the country in the previous year, IRNA reported.

He put the country's total gas consumption in the previous year at 249 billion cubic meters, which was also seven billion cubic meters more than the figure for a year earlier.

liquid fuel for the power plants over the past 2.5 years.

During the mentioned period, 3.6 million liters of gas oil and 2.5 million liters of fuel oil were supplied to 110 power plants across the country. In September 2023, NIGC Head Majid Chegeni said the cumulative gas supply to the country's power plants in the first six months of the previous

Iranian calendar year (March 21-September 22, 2023) increased by 16 percent compared to last year's same period, registering a new record high.

According to Chegeni, due to the increase in gas supply in the mentioned period, the consumption of liquid fuel in the power plants significantly decreased which resulted in less air pollution.





Maritime legacy and cultural traditions of Bandar Kong



Iranica Desk

Bandar Kong, situated in Hormozgan Province in the south of Iran, stands as a significant port where a range of activities like navigation, boat building, agriculture, and more thrived. The inhabitants of this port engaged not only in navigation but also in diverse occupations such as agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, pottery, blacksmithing, and various other trades. Nevertheless, owing to its port status and the presence of seafaring families and boat builders, the

primary focus of the people in Bandar Kong has been on navigation and the maritime economy. Throughout history, Bandar Kong remained a hub for sea voyages and boat construction, facilitating journeys to India, Africa, Yemen, Iraq, and various ports in the Persian Gulf. These expeditions led to significant economic, cultural, and social advancements, encouraging sailors to continue exploring the seas and fostering competition and collaboration among seafaring families in boat building and maritime activities.

Archaeological findings in Bandar Kong attest to its role as a commercial gateway in the Persian Gulf over the ages. During the Safavid, Atabakan Fars, Seljuk, and subsequent periods, the port flourished, leaving behind artifacts from different historical eras.

The port boasted numerous freshwater wells, supporting agricultural endeavors across various areas. Migration to Kong from diverse regions was common, with migrants from Qazvin being notable among them, leading to the establishment of a renowned neighborhood known as Qazviniha in Bandar Kong.

The people of Qazvin, who arrived in Bandar Kong from the Safavid period onwards, were involved in blacksmithing. Many families also relocated to this city from neighboring ports. Given the flourishing maritime industry in Bandar Kong, sailors from nearby ports also journeyed to Bandar Kong and embarked on sea voyages using the boats. Some of these sailors eventually acquired boats themselves and settled in Bandar Kong. Recognizing the significance of boat building in Bandar Kong, rulers like Nadershah Afshar placed special emphasis on supporting boat builders. They directed their officials to provide financial assistance and aid in the construction of wooden vessels.

The sailors of Bandar Kong possess traditional knowledge of sailing, played a crucial role in shaping the maritime history of Iranians over time. At present, wooden boat building in the Persian Gulf is thriving in Bandar Kong and Qeshm Island.

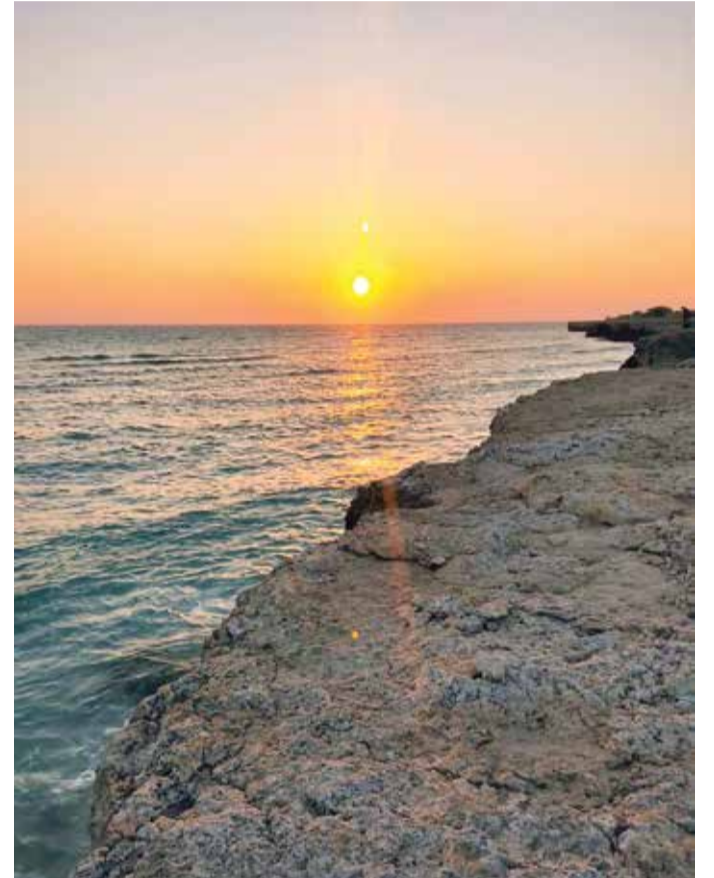
Moreover, food culture and clothing represent some of the intangible cultural heritages of Bandar Kong. The tradition of drinking coffee has always been an intriguing custom in the southern

parts of Iran, including Bandar Kong. Although many aspects of this tradition have faded into obscurity today, in the past, it held significant importance. The individual serving the coffee was highly attuned to the subtleties of the gathering, carefully observing which hand they used to offer the coffee and which hand was used to receive it. If the drinker shook the coffee cup, it signaled that there was no need to pour more coffee for them. Coffee gatherings were typically hosted among the nobility.

The hospitality customs towards guests in Bandar Kong have always been captivating, as hosts endeavor to welcome guests in the most exquisite manner. Guest rooms were a common feature in many homes in Bandar Kong, typically situated near their entrance. These guest rooms, embellished with luxurious carpets, served as spaces for entertaining relatives and friends in the absence of guests.

The traditional attire and the significance of local clothing in Bandar Kong are noteworthy. Despite the influence of diverse fashion trends in the southern regions of Iran, the residents of Bandar Kong have preserved many elements of their traditional clothing heritage. Local garments like the *chador*, trousers, and others are frequently worn by women in Bandar Kong. Visitors to the port often purchase these local garments, which are available at the Handicrafts House in Bandar Kong, showcasing the artistic talents of the women. While the *burqa* was previously used by some women, its usage has notably declined in recent times. Several women and girls in Bandar Kong sustain themselves through traditional clothing handicrafts.

The men's clothing culture has also evolved significantly over



time, with technological advancements and the introduction of cooling devices leading to a complete transformation of men's attire in Bandar Kong compared to the past.

Fars serves as cradle of Persian nationhood, power

After the Aryans settled in Kerman, they likely moved on to occupy Fars, a region that, as its name implies, became the focal point of the Persian nation.

Here the representatives of the southern branch of the Aryans achieved political unity and created a strong state. Later, when the Persian kings transferred their residence to richer regions, Fars did not lose its significance for them; this is testified even today by the ruins of the buildings erected here by the Achaemenids and Sassanids.

From Fars originated not only the founders of the Persian state in the sixth

century BCE, but also the dynasty that in the third century CE restored the might of Persian nationhood and religion and that successfully put an end to the ambitions of the Roman empire at a moment when the Romans, unaware of the Persian national resurgence, considered final victory over a weakened Parthian state only a matter of time.

Even in the Muslim period, Fars retained its importance for Persian national feeling; the language of Fars remained the literary idiom of all Persians.

Strabo (a Greek geographer), as well as the Arab geographers, divides



Fars into three climatic zones: a cold, a temper-

ate, and a hot one. In the intermediate, most

fertile zone converged the characteristic vegeta-

tion of both the cold and warm lands. The basin of the large salty Bakhtegan Lake was considered part of the cold zone, together with all the districts to the north of it; even Yazd and its district, geographically more closely linked with Kerman, were considered a part of Fars.

During their movement from Kerman into Fars, the Aryans occupied first the northern part of the latter, penetrating there, along one of the three roads that, according to the Arab geographers, connected Sirjan with Fars. One of these roads led to the city of Istakhr, located near the ruins of ancient

Persepolis. The valleys of the rivers Kur and its affluent called Parwab, Pulwar, or Murghab remained the center of Fars until the beginning of the dynasty of the Sassanids. The valley of the Pulwar is divided into two parts, northern and southern, by the gorge in which the village of Sivand is located; in the northern part are the ruins of Takht-e Madar-e Sulayman, in which most scholars see the ruins of Pasargadae, the ancient capital of Persia. Having passed through the gorge of Sivand, the Pulwar issues from the valley of Hajjiabad into the fertile plain of Marvdasht.

Blinken's plan for Arab defense coalition against Iran to fail

By Hoda Yousefi
Middle East affairs expert

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

For decades, the United States has pursued building an alliance of Arab nations against Iran in the Middle East. Despite ongoing efforts spanning multiple presidential terms, the realization of this plan has remained elusive. While the Abraham Accords represent a significant advancement towards this goal, previous attempts, including the establishment of regional bases, arms sales to Arab countries, and the proposed defense plan, have not culminated in the creation of a robust strategic alliance against Iran. In the following discussion, we will delve into the reasons why the current endeavors led by Secretary of State Antony Blinken will fail in achieving this objective.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (front) arrives in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on March 20, 2024.
EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/REUTERS

Deep divisions among Persian Gulf Arab states

The Persian Gulf region is embroiled in deep-seated divisions among Arab countries, stemming from power rivalries, ideological differences, and regional disputes. These frictions have led to divergent priorities and interests, preventing the formation of a cohesive coalition against Iran. Smaller countries such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman view Iran as a necessary counterbalance to Saudi Arabia's influence. They are apprehensive that the excessive weakening of Iran could theoretically leave them vulnerable to Saudi hegemony. This concern is underscored by the existing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Furthermore, the UAE also has its own disagreements with Saudi Arabia and prefers to maintain its independence from the Kingdom in the face of the perceived Iranian threat.

Fears of tensions with Iran

Some Arab nations are apprehensive about the potential implications of heightening tensions with Iran, which may include security risks and economic concerns, and are inclined to uphold their ties with Tehran. This inclination is particularly true of the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. The confined geographical size and susceptibility of these countries make them vulnerable to potential retaliatory actions from Iran. Furthermore, these nations are uneasy about the prospect of escalating regional tensions with Iran and the potential emergence of a prolonged security crisis, which could jeopardize investment security in their territories and scare away investors and businesses.

Many Arab nations prefer the region to be in a state of tension with Iran as

it allows them to secure benefits from the United States and use this tension as a negotiating tool. Iran also serves as a balancing force in their relationships with other Arab countries. Moreover, tension with Iran ensures military support from the United States. Therefore, becoming embroiled in tension with Iran not only fails to serve their interests, but also leaves these countries vulnerable. However, attempting to control Iran or engaging in a broad war with the country would create significant uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the future of regional security arrangements.

Prevailing public sentiment in Arab nations

The Arab countries are facing a significant challenge with the public sentiment within their borders, especially in the aftermath of the Gaza

war and the October 7 Hamas operation. These events have sparked a surge of anti-Israeli sentiments among the people in these countries. Iran's missile and drone attacks on the Zionist regime have also contributed to an increase in Iran's influence in the public opinion of the region's countries. Consequently, many of these countries are apprehensive that getting involved in formal confrontations with Iran or forming anti-Iranian alliances could potentially lead to internal crises.

Overall, Arab nations are reluctant to engage in extensive interstate tension within the region. Consequently, the primary focus of these nations, particularly those bordering the Persian Gulf, is to assume a balancing role in the region. This strategic positioning enables them to uphold their relationships with the United States

while containing key regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is evident that these nations are cautious about exerting excessive control over Iran as they recognize the potential risks it poses to their own interests.

The above-mentioned factors have contributed to the persistence of challenges the United States has faced in establishing a defense coalition against Iran over the past few decades. Washington has received the message loud and clear as Arab states are inching closer toward cooperating with Iran after Iran's missile attack on the Zionist regime. To effectively rally an alliance against Iran, the US must prioritize addressing the role of small regional countries in future security arrangements and ensuring investment security within these nations.

Iran gaining credibility across Muslim world

By Shahram Akbarzadeh
Deputy director at
Alfred Deakin Institute

OPINION

Iran's leadership has been a direct beneficiary of the months-long war in Gaza. With every missile that Israel fires on Gaza, every US veto of a UN Security Council cease-fire resolution, and every arrest of an anti-war protester on American university campuses, Iran's rejection of the US-dominated world order gains more credibility in the Muslim world. The ruling clerical regime in Iran has built its foreign policy on the pillar of anti-Americanism, rejecting what it frames as the "injustice" of US domination and "bullying" of other countries. Washington's continued support for Israel's war on Gaza in the face of an increasing international backlash has only reinforced this narrative.

While the US has tried to backtrack and signal that humanitarian considerations should guide Israel's conduct of the war, the damage to US credibility has been done. Many around the world — and specifically in Muslim countries — do not see the belated US warnings to Israel as genuine. And Tehran's message of anti-Americanism is resonating with large segments of the public in the Muslim world.

In one regional opinion survey in late October, for instance, just 7% of respondents said the US had a positive impact on the war, compared to 40% who viewed Iran's role as positive. And in December, the highly re-

spected Arab Barometer reported that approval ratings for the Iranian Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had surpassed those of the Saudi crown prince and Emirati president. This change in Iran's standing in the region is being watched with concern by the political elite in the neighbourhood.

What Iran sought to achieve by attacking Israel

Iran's image has been further enhanced by the fact it is the only Muslim state to attack Israel against the backdrop of public outrage over the war in Gaza. The Iranian missile and drone attack

on Israel on April 13 was calibrated to achieve two key objectives.

First, Iran's leaders sought to preserve the country's image as the self-appointed head of the "axis of resistance", comprised of its backed groups in the region — Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and other resistance groups in Iraq and Syria.

Iran also wanted to demonstrate the effectiveness of its deterrence model, which is based on the threat of retaliation against Israeli aggression through its backed actors and expanding missile and drone technology.

Coming two weeks after the Israeli

attack on its diplomatic mission in Damascus, Iran could not afford to outsource its response to its backed groups. While Iran was clearly not ready to start a war with Israel, not responding in kind to the Israeli attack would have made it look weak and seriously diminished its standing among its allies and backed groups. Iran's second objective was to demonstrate to the world that it has the drone and missile technology to hit back at Israel if it chooses. For more than a decade, Iran has showcased its missiles during annual military parades to support its claim it can hit Israel if threatened. Its attack last month involved more

than 300 drones and missiles. Notwithstanding the fact the damage was minimal, the attack was proof that Iran now has the capacity to inflict pain on Israel. Israel's limited response to Iran suggests that war has been averted, much to the relief of neighbouring countries. But the long-term implications are more favourable for Iran. This show of strength has likely helped its rejectionist foreign policy find receptive ears in the Muslim world and beyond.

When Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Pakistan on April 23, for example, he was greeted like a celebrity. This was ironic as, earlier this year, Iran and Pakistan had engaged in tit-for-tat aerial attacks.

The two countries agreed to boost bilateral trade to \$10 billion (A\$15 billion) a year, about five times the current level. They also released a joint statement calling on the UN Security Council to take action against Israel, saying it had "illegally" targeted neighbouring countries and foreign diplomatic compounds.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also offered a message of support to Iran, saying:

China noted Iran's statement that its action was restrained and was an act of self-defence in response to the attack on its embassy.

What this could mean for the region

The implications of a more emboldened Iran for the region are severe. The Iranian authorities feel vindicated by the events of the last seven months. This means their anti-US and anti-Israel rhetoric will remain staunch as ever.



A welcome billboard displaying an image of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (L) and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is seen along a street in Karachi, Pakistan, on April 22, 2024.
● RIZWAN TABASSUM/AFP



University students surround and welcome Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (front-facing center) during his visit to the Government College University (GCU) in Lahore, Pakistan, on April 23, 2024.
● IRNA

Iran's drone and missile research and development program is also likely to receive a boost. And Iran's support for its network of backed groups and allies will remain firmly in place as this enables the Iranian leadership to project power beyond its borders and retain its deterrence capability.

None of this bodes well for Iran's neighbours. An ideologically energised Islamic regime in Iran would be less accommodating to regional concerns, particularly those aired by governments that have already normalised relations with Israel (such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) or are believed to be heading in that direction (Saudi Arabia). Moreover, the political credibility of many Arab leaders has suffered in the eyes of their citizens due to their perceived ineffectiveness in supporting the Palestinians in Gaza.

Iran's leaders did not plan the series of events that started with the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7. In fact, they were just as surprised by Hamas' actions as the Israeli intelligence agencies. But they are the obvious beneficiary of the turn of events.

The United States and Israel are gifting Iran and its message of defiance enormous appeal, well beyond the imagination of Iranian authorities.

The full article first appeared on *The Conversation*.

Gaza war helps Iran repair image in region



By Kelly Skinner
Freelance Middle East analyst

OPINION

Israel's assault on Gaza has in some ways proven to be a boon for Iran, furthering some of its strategic objectives and boosting its reputation in the region. In November 2023, a report by the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy found that an average of 40% of respondents in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria said Iran's actions have had a positive impact on the war. In Egypt and Syria, such sentiments were expressed by half of the respondents.

Polling from the Arab Barometer echoes this trajectory. A December 2023 report indicated that three weeks after the October 7, 2023, Palestinian surprise attack on Israel, Iran's leader had approval ratings that matched or surpassed those of the Saudi crown prince and the Emirati president. While Tunisia is geographically far from West Asia, public opinion there is often treated as a "bellwether" by pollsters. Indeed, the Arab Barometer has noted that in previous surveys, "Tunisians have had views similar to those found in most other Arab countries."

The boost to Iran's reputation comes in the wake of increasing efforts to widen Arab-Israeli normalization. This has stoked Iranian concerns about becoming isolated and prompted a shift in Tehran's strategy. Against this backdrop, in his September 2023 address before the United Nations General Assembly, President Ebrahim Raisi laid out Iran's focus on cooperation with neighboring states while maintaining hostility towards Israel and the United States.

Retained focus on regional diplomacy

Following the Palestinian surprise attack on Israel, Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei hailed the actions of Hamas. Yet, he also made a point to strongly deny any Iranian role in the assault on Israeli border communities

near Gaza. By balancing support for the Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, and Yemeni members of the Iran-led regional alliance network known as the 'Axis of Resistance' with his denial of direct involvement in October 7, Ayatollah Khamenei signaled that Iran preferred to avoid a wider conflict. This is while both Israel and the US were warned to limit their actions to avoid expanding the Gaza war.



Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Abdulaziz (R) greets the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who was wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh, on his arrival in Riyadh on November 11, 2023.
● AFP

Ayatollah Khamenei's actions set the stage for Iran's broader diplomatic efforts in the region over the past six months. Indeed, the Islamic Republic has taken full advantage of the opportunity posed by the fighting in Gaza to further its diplomatic agenda. For instance, contrary to expectations in some quarters, the normalization process with Saudi Arabia has not been derailed. Instead, ties have been strengthened with the Kingdom.

Shortly after Israel's incursion into Gaza in October 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud discussed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the phone. This notably marked the first time the leaders had spoken since the two countries agreed to restore ties in March 2023, ending seven years of estrangement. The convergence of Iranian and Saudi interests and cooperation on the Palestinian cause is particularly noteworthy

given that the Kingdom is a staunch US ally and has refrained from rejecting normalization with Israel.

The Iranian-Saudi rapprochement progressed further as Raisi traveled to Riyadh in early November 2023 for a special summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on the Gaza war. This marked the first time in over a decade that an Iranian president visited Saudi Arabia.

Iran followed up this landmark diplomacy through a mid-February diplomatic tour of Arab countries including Lebanon, where the Iranian foreign minister once again reiterated that there is no desire for a regional war, as well as Algeria, Syria, and Qatar. In addition, Tehran has been pushing for another meeting of the OIC. All in all, the bolstering of Iran's reputation in the region — simultaneous with the hit to the image of the US — may have aided this engagement.

Dynamics during conflict

Historically, Iran has seen its popularity thrive in the Arab world during conflicts between its regional allies and Israel.

This dynamic was evident during and after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. In 2008, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies' Arab Opinion Index found that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was the most popular leader

in the Arab world, followed by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, and then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13). The same poll also showed that while 11% of Arab respondents had deemed Iran as one of the two countries posing the greatest threat in 2006, this number decreased to 7% in 2008. At the same, perceptions of the US and Israel as threats increased from 72% to 88% and 85% to 95%, respectively.

As indicated by the 2019/2020 Arab Opinion Index, from 2011 to 2020, Iran came to be viewed as a rising threat in Arab countries. This was even the case in Shiite-majority Iraq, where the same poll found that 91% of Iraqis disapproved of Iranian foreign policy. It was amid this turn of Arab public opinion that relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia — which found themselves increasingly on opposing sides in conflicts in the region — were severed in 2016.

Though Iran's reputation had not fully recovered prior to the ongoing Gaza war, the Islamic Republic had made some strides toward reducing tensions with Arab states. Beyond the normalization with Saudi Arabia in March 2023, this significantly included renewed engagement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2021 as well as diplomatic efforts made toward restoring relations with Bahrain in June 2023.

Yet, prior to the solidification of a common enemy in Israel, there was little indication that these outreach efforts translated to a warming of public opinion toward Iran in Arab states.

Looking ahead

The longer the Gaza war continues, the more Iran can be expected to strengthen its relationships with Arab governments. If the early reports from the Arab Barometer and the Washington Institute are any indication, Tehran's response to the war — both diplomatically and with its historical support for Palestine — will continue to gain favor with the Arab publics.

On the other hand, as the US continues to support Israel — even as it attempts to restrain Tel Aviv's most militant actions — America's standing in the Arab world will likely continue to plummet. Developments such as the US vetoing of an Arab-led and Iran-backed UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza only solidified this reality.

The full article first appeared on *Amwaj Media*.

Geraei to get a last shot at Paris ticket



Iranian Greco-Roman wrestler Mohammadali Geraei (red) is seen in action during a national team training session in Tehran on May 11, 2024. ● IWF

Sports Desk

Greco-Roman wrestler Mohammadali Geraei will make a late tilt at a place in the Iranian squad at the Paris Olympics when taking part at the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial tournament – starting June 6 in Budapest. The three-time world bronze medalist will be joined by fellow-Iranian Mohammadreza Mokhtari in the UWW Ranking Series event. Should either of the two wrestlers win the gold medal in Budapest, he will get a shot at the Olympic 77kg berth against fellow-Iranian Amin Kavianejad on June 23, the Iranian Wrestling Federation announced on Saturday. A silver medalist in last October's Asian Games, Kavianejad secured the 77kg slot for the country at the Asian Olympic qualification event in Bishkek in April as Iran became the first country to complete a full set of six Greco-Roman quotas for the

showpiece in the French capital. A single victory in the domestic trial will be enough for Kavianejad to punch his Paris ticket, with his opponent needing two, the federation said. The news came as a turn of fortunes for 30-year-old Geraei, who had been handed a 12-month ban by the United World Wrestling back in November – due to an incident in last year's World Championships – before the international governing body lifted the punishment in February. The Japan Wrestling Federation had lodged a complaint to the UWW over the Iranian's misconduct during a 67kg bout featuring his younger brother Mohammadreza and Kyotaro Sogabe of Japan in Belgrade. Mohammadreza had a 10-9 advantage over the Japanese but was clearly out of breath in the second period, when Mohammadali threw a bottle of mineral water on the mat to halt the bout, presumably buying the

Iranian some time to restore strength. Mokhtari, meanwhile, will be relieved to get a second chance of Olympic participation after the Iranian federation had initially suspended him "until further notice" in March in the aftermath of a physical altercation with a Turkish opponent in the Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament in Antalya. The incident came in the closing stages of a last-four encounter, where Mokhtari, trailing a 7-3 scoreline, complained to the referee over the host's Yuksel Saricicek repeatedly using his arm an elbow when defending the Iranian's attacks, before his frustration eventually led to an exchange of punches and kicks between the two wrestlers. Members from the two camps, including Iranian head coach Hassan Rangraz, as well as the organizing officials had to interfere to end the brawl and both athletes were disqualified afterwards.

Persepolis coach Osmar set for permanent role: Report

Sports Desk

Persepolis interim head coach Osmar Loss Vieira is set to be handed the permanent job on the Persian Gulf Pro League club's bench for the start of the next season, according to IRNA. Having joined the Tehran Reds as an assistant to Yahya Golmohammadi in July 2022, the Brazilian was part of the coaching staff during last season's domestic double-winning campaign and took the caretaker role in January after former head coach parted ways with the club. His appointment drew criticism from sections of the Reds faithful, who were eager to have ex-boss Branko Ivankovic back on the bench – before the Croatian turned down the Persepolis offer – but a run of impressive results and performances has seen Osmar win the supporters over, convincing the club to extend his spell beyond the end of the ongoing campaign. Blessed with the addition of striker Issa Alekasir, Uzbek winger Oston Urunov, and Qatari fullback Abdelkarim Hassan in the winter break, Osmar has steered Persepo-

lis to nine wins in 12 league outings – losing once – though his tactical acumen was questioned when the Reds relinquished a two-goal lead twice before falling to a shootout defeat against Iralco in the Hazfi Cup last 16. IRNA wrote the club board and the 48-year-old Brazilian, whose experience as a head coach had been limited to short stints in his country, have had several meetings in recent days and are expected to agree on a one-year contract in the coming weeks. Chasing a seventh top-flight crown in eight years, Persepolis is second in the league table with 59 points – one adrift of city rival Esteghlal – with three games to spare. The Tehran Reds will play relegation-threatened Esteghlal Khuzestan at home on Tuesday before visiting Shams Azar next Sunday. The final round of league fixtures will see Persepolis welcome Mes Rafsanjan at the Azadi Stadium on May 11. ● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA



Iranians Alamian, Shahsavari seal table tennis berths for Olympics

Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis players Nima Alamian and Neda Shahsavari won a couple of quotas for the country in the singles event of the Paris Olympics in July. In an all-Iranian men's final in the Central Asia Regional Qualification event in Tashkent, Alamian came out on top against his brother Noshad 4-1 (11-4, 5-11, 11-6, 11-8, 11-7) on Sunday to secure a third successive Olympic participation. Nima had beaten Zokhid Kenjaev of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan's Alan Kurmangaliyev to win the group in the Uzbek capital before knockout victories over the host's Shokhrukh Iskandarov and Kirill Ger-

assimenko from Kazakhstan sent him into the final showdown. The triumph was the latest episode in a remarkable eight months for the Iranian, who ended the country's 65-year drought in the Asian Games last October by grabbing the men's team bronze – alongside Noshad and Amirhossein Hodaei – before teaming up with his brother for a third-place finish in the doubles event in Hangzhou. Earlier on Sunday, Iranian girl Shahsavari came from behind twice to beat Kazakhstan's Sarvinoz Mirkadirova 4-3 (4-11, 13-11, 9-11, 11-9, 14-12, 11-13, 13-11) in a thrilling women's singles final in Tashkent. A clean sweep of three wins had seen Shahsavari top the

group before she defeated fellow-Iranian Mahshid Ashtari 4-3 for a place in the final.

Noshad on course

Despite Sunday's defeat, the older of the Alamian brothers remains in contention for an Olympic berth through the ITTF Men's Singles World Ranking. The left-handed Iranian moved up by 17 spots – the second highest in the top 60 – to stand 51st in the latest world ranking, thanks to a decent run in the Saudi Smash in Riyadh earlier in May, where Noshad rallied past world No. 4 Liang Jingkun from China in five games, before his campaign came to an end against Chinese teenager Lin Shidong in the round of 16.



Nima Alamian, pictured at last year's Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, will participate at a third successive Olympic Games in Paris. ● XINHUA



Sympathy for Ukraine behind Usyk's heavyweight win, says Fury

REUTERS – Tyson Fury said sympathy for Ukraine was behind the judges' awarding a split-decision victory to Oleksandr Usyk in their heavyweight boxing title fight on Sunday, with the Briton calling for an immediate rematch. After cruising through the middle of the fight, Fury never recovered from a standing eight count in the ninth round, and the judges gave the fight to Usyk, making him the first undisputed heavyweight champion in almost 25 years. "I believe I won that fight. I believe he won a few of the rounds but I won the majority of them His country is at war, and people are siding with the country at war, but make no mistake, I won that fight," Fury said in a post-fight interview in the ring. Ukraine has been fighting a Russian invasion that started more than two years ago. "I'll be back. I've got a rematch clause," the previously undefeated Fury added, with promoter Frank Warren saying in the ring another fight between

the two was a certainty. "That's what the contract says. It's what he wants. It's his call, it's Tyson's call. So whatever he wants to do, it's up to him," Warren said. After an intriguing 12-round battle that saw both men enjoy success, plenty of boxing fans would relish the chance to see the pair go at it again, especially after Usyk managed to turn the tide.

"We'll go back to our families and I'll see him again in October. We'll go back, rest up. I believe I won the fight but I'm not going to sit and cry and make excuses. We'll run it again in October," Fury said. Asked if he would be prepared to face Fury again, Usyk, who did not respond directly to Fury's claim, was unequivocal. "Yes, of course," the 37-year-old Ukrainian said.



Oleksandr Usyk (L) lands a punch on Tyson Fury during a heavyweight unification fight in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 19, 2024. ● ACTION IMAGES

Jordan calls for int'l probe into Israel's war crimes in Gaza



The handout picture released by the Israeli army on May 18, 2024 shows Israeli soldiers during military operations in the Gaza Strip. AFP

International Desk

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said on Sunday that the kingdom demanded an international investigation into what it said were many war crimes committed by the Israeli regime during its genocidal war on the Gaza Strip.

In remarks made during a press conference with the head of the UN Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA), Safadi said those responsible for documented crimes should be brought to justice.

Safadi's tough words came after an Israeli strike killed at least 31 people and

wounded 20 more in a family house in the central Nuseirat refugee camp. The wounded included several children and rescuers were searching the rubble for missing people, said the Palestinian official news agency Wafa, while the Israeli army said it was checking the reports.

Israeli troops have moved in on Gaza's crowded far-southern city of Rafah, which they describe as the last Hamas stronghold and where the UN says 800,000 civilians have been newly displaced by the fighting. On Saturday, Palestinian relatives wailed with grief as victims including an in-

fant were rushed to Kamal Adwan hospital in northern Beit Lahia, following Israeli strikes and heavy clashes in Jabalia. Abu Nabil, a Jabalia resident, said "tanks and bulldozers approached our homes, forcing us to leave, after they struck a neighboring house, injuring us. I call upon all free people in the world, to anyone with a shred of humanity... there are massacres happening here. Children are being torn to pieces. What's the fault of these children and women?"

The stranglehold on aid reaching Gaza threatens an "apocalyptic" outcome, the UN's humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths said on Sunday as he warned of famine in the besieged territory.

"If fuel runs out, aid doesn't get to the people where they need it, that famine, which we have talked about for so long, and which is looming, will not be looming anymore. It will be present," Griffiths said.

"And I think our worry, as citizens of the international community, is that the

consequence is going to be really, really hard. Hard, difficult, and apocalyptic," he told AFP on the sidelines of meetings with Qatari officials in Doha.

An Israeli incursion into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, launched in the face of international outcry, has deepened an already perilous humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

Griffiths, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said some 50 trucks of aid per day could reach the hardest-hit north of Gaza through the reopened Erez crossing. But battles near the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings in Gaza's south meant the vital routes were "effectively blocked", he explained.

"So, aid getting in through land routes to the south and for Rafah, and the people dislodged by Rafah is almost nil," Griffiths added. Since the beginning of Israel's war on Gaza, the regime's strikes have claimed the lives of more than 35,000 Palestinians so far.

Rift in Israel's war cabinet over postwar Gaza plan



One of Israel's most senior politicians has vowed he will resign from the war cabinet if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fails to set out a long-term vision for the future of war-ravaged Gaza.

Speaking at a press conference on Saturday night, Benny Gantz said he would step down from the war cabinet if a plan for installing a civilian administration in the Hamas-controlled territory wasn't in place by June 8. His remarks followed similar criticism from Defense Minister Yoav Gallant last week, Politico reported.

"If you put the national over personal, you will find in us partners in the struggle," Gantz warned Netanyahu. But he said if Netanyahu chooses the path of fanatics and leads the entire nation to the abyss, he will be forced to quit the cabinet.

Gantz, a former Israel Defense Forces general, has called for a six-point plan that includes demilitarization of Gaza, returning Israeli hostages and establishing multinational governance over the area, home to more than half a million Palestinians.

Netanyahu said Gantz's demands amounted to nothing more than "washed up words" that would mean "defeat for Israel." The Israeli cabinet has stepped up its military campaign in Gaza, ordering troops into the southern city of Rafah despite pleas from the US, the EU and humanitarian organizations against a ground invasion of the city.

With the Israel-Hamas conflict now in its eighth month, concerns are growing that Netanyahu has no clear end goal in sight. Defense chief Gallant on Wednesday called on the prime minister to publicly confirm that Israel will not take over rule of the Gaza Strip militarily, but says he has received no response.

Meanwhile, Palestinian resistance forces in Gaza have stepped up their attacks against the Israeli targets inside the besieged territory. On Sunday, the armed wings of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas announced on Telegram that they destroyed a unit of Israeli special forces in the north Gaza refugee camp.

They said that the attack took place on Al-Albani Street in Jabalia.

Fierce fighting has been ongoing in Jabalia for the past several days after Israeli ground forces re-entered the area earlier in the week. According to the UN, 35,000 people have been killed in Gaza since Israel launched its offensive last year following the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas that killed 1,139 Israelis.

Iran confirms indirect talks with US in Oman

International Desk

Iran confirmed that it held indirect talks with the United States in Oman on escalating tensions in the Middle East region.

On Friday, American news website Axios reported that US and Iranian officials held indirect talks in Oman "on how to avoid escalating regional attacks".

The official IRNA news



agency said late Saturday that "the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations confirmed indirect negotiations between Iran and the United States in Oman".

It quoted him as saying that "these negotiations were not the first and will not be the last", without giving the time and place of the talks.

Two top Biden administration officials held

indirect talks with Iranian officials in Oman on how to avoid escalating regional attacks, two sources with knowledge of the talks told Axios.

The talks - involving President Biden's top Middle East adviser, Brett McGurk, and Abram Paley the acting US envoy for Iran - were the first round of discussions between the US and Iran since January, when similar negotia-

tions were held in Oman. The discussions were held after Iran launched an unprecedented drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13.

The barrage came in response to an Israeli air strike on April 1 that targeted Iran's consulate in Syria's capital Damascus and killed seven members of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, two of them generals.

Global rallies call for immediate cease-fire in Gaza

International Desk

Thousands of pro-Palestinian protesters once again took to the streets across the world to show their anger at the Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip and to commemorate the 76th anniversary of the Nakba Day - the mass displacement of people by Israel in 1948.

In London, pro-v protesters marched through central city on Saturday, reiterating calls for a cease-fire in Gaza. The pro-Palestinian march was the 14th such event held in London since Israel launched its devastating war on the Gaza Strip on October 7. The Israel's offensive has killed more than 35,000 people - mostly women and children.

In the US, police have beaten and arrested several demonstrators at a pro-Palestine protest in New York's Brooklyn in the latest crackdown on voices speaking against the war on Gaza in the United States. Protesters

gathered on Saturday in the Bay Ridge neighborhood in southwest Brooklyn, home to a large Muslim community, including people of Palestinian and Yemeni origins. The peaceful protest to mark the Nakba - the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948 - went on for several hours amid heavy police presence, with officers trying to prevent a march.

"Protesters began to march in the street and shortly after, the New York Police Department came in from a side street and started grabbing people at random," Katie Smith, a freelance journalist who was at the scene, told Al Jazeera.

"They were tackled to the ground and were often placed under arrest by multiple officers, who beat them, punching them on their upper bodies and around their heads. There were multiple waves of arrests during the march, which was peaceful."

On Saturday, a crowd of several hundred people, including a number of Jewish demonstrators, also protested in Washington, DC under the rain to mark the 76th anniversary of the Nakba.

"They are Palestinian Americans and they are supporters, coming to the nation's capital, chanting 'free Palestine' and accusing US President Joe Biden of being complicit in genocide".

Also, thousands of individuals across various European cities, including Berlin, Munich, Dublin, Rome, Madrid, and Vienna, rallied to denounce Israel's war on Gaza. In Munich, Germany thousands of pro-Palestine demonstrators chanted slogans such as "Free Palestine," "Free Gaza" and "End the Genocide", while waving Palestine flags and holding placards and signs of returning to homes lost in the Nakba in 1948.

Despite government restric-

tions against Palestine protests, Berlin held the largest pro-Palestine march since the outbreak of the Israeli war on Gaza. In Vienna, the capital of Austria, thousands of people gathered at the Cultural Square, carrying Palestinian flags and banners with slogans such as "No to Genocide," "Israel is a Terrorist," and "Free Gaza."

In Italy, pro-Gaza protests were organized in various cities. Advocates organized a rally titled "Turin for Gaza" in Turin, as a group of protesters fired the flags of the European Union and US-led NATO during the protest.



A pro-Palestinian supporter stands with a placard showing the 'Palestinian key', a symbol of homes lost in the Nakba, at a march through central London, on May 18, 2024, to commemorate the 76th anniversary of the Nakba and call for an end to arms sales to Israel.

● BENJAMIN CREMEL/AFP



Tehran book fair closes with over 3m titles sold

35th TIBF sees 25% sales increase



The 35th Tehran International Book Fair (TIBF) concluded, achieving significant success with over three million books sold. This year's fair, held from May 8 to 19 at the Imam Khomeini Mosalla, saw a 25% increase in sales compared to the previous year, IRNA wrote. The event, themed "Let's Read and Create," featured 2,700 domestic and international publishers and booksellers. Among the participants were 60 for-

ign publishers showcasing 50,000 titles. Yemen was honored as the special guest of the fair. For the first time, the entire Mosalla was dedicated to the book fair, enhancing the cultural significance of the event. Special emphasis was placed on literary tourism, drawing attention from cultural attachés from about 10 countries. Notable attendees included Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Pres-

ident Ebrahim Raisi, and other high-ranking Iranian officials, who toured the fair during its 11-day run. The public rated this year's fair 70 out of 100 points on average, reflecting widespread satisfaction with the event. In addition, the city of Semnan, recognized as Iran's book capital, participated in the exhibition, further highlighting the nation's commitment to promoting literacy and culture.



Deputy minister: Over 1,600 tourism projects launched in Iran since 2021

Social Desk

Iran has inaugurated 1,610 tourism projects since August 2021, according to the Deputy Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts. Ali-Asghar Shalbafian announced the milestone at the reopening ceremony of the historic Risbaf Factory in Isfahan, which is being restored and redesigned to serve as a regional museum, IRNA wrote. Shalbafian highlighted that 2,400 tourism projects are currently under-

way across the country. He noted that tourism ranks among the top three sectors for project implementation in Iran. He also mentioned that 81 projects are more than 80% complete and are expected to be operational soon. The deputy minister pointed out that 47 major projects, including the Risbaf Factory, have recently been unblocked and progressed. These projects hold significant national and international importance. "The reopening of Risbaf not only brings joy to the

people but also serves as a model for the restoration of historical structures in other cities," Shalbafian said. He urged local officials to facilitate public access to the factory during its restoration, emphasizing its symbolic representation of Isfahan's resilience. Shalbafian confirmed the ministry's commitment to establishing a regional office for handicrafts and tourism at the Risbaf site to enhance global connections for local artisans. Amir Karamzadeh, Director General of Isfahan's Cultural Heritage,

Handicrafts, and Tourism Department, praised the resolution of the complex Risbaf project after 20 years, calling it a significant achievement of the government. He remarked that the restoration of this historic building would not only elevate its global reputation but also boost the local economy. The Risbaf Factory restoration ceremony was held on International Museum Day (May 18), underscoring the global significance of cultural heritage and preservation efforts.

PERSPECTIVE EXCLUSIVE

Iran with a population of more than 88 million people has been beset by a population crisis over the past decades, particularly since the 1980s, when the Islamic Republic's population control policies promoted the slogan of "the fewer the children, the merrier the life" in order to more adequately regulate the provision of livelihood needs for the then-extended families during Iran-Iraq's post-war era.

The successive Iranian administrations have been striving to revoke the policy and increase the population growth rate since the 2000s through various family policies that incentivize childbearing and fertility. The compensatory measures have managed to decelerate the tempo of decline in the birth rate across the country but are still short of heralding a cataclysmic change in family approaches

Iran's birth rate facing menace by illegal abortion trends



toward giving birth to more children. According to statistics, more than a million individuals are annually added to the Iranian population but, if current trends persist, the growth rate is projected to reach zero within the next seven years, thereafter turning negative. Concerns over the steep downturn in birth rate in Iran has been exacerbated by the growing trend in the

number of abortions which are carried out either by private clinics or through the use of illegal pills available in the black market. Iran's Parliament has passed legislation to outlaw tubectomy, vasectomy, and the free dispensation of contraceptives other than where pregnancy would threaten a woman's health. The bill obliges the government to offer incentives, including a 7.5-fold increase in

child-benefit payments to government employees, interest-free loans, and other perks. Despite stringent measures adopted by Iran's Ministry of Health to keep a rein on the prescription, distribution and accessibility of contraceptive devices in medical facilities and drug stores, the younger generation is partly inclined to undergo abortion surgeries in underground and often

unsanitary places to terminate their pregnancies. "Illegal abortions should be prevented except they are diagnosed by qualified doctors. The abortion rate is high and alarming. Everyone involved should work hard to stop it," Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said in an official ceremony on population growth and childbearing on Saturday. "Young boys and girls should be aware that unauthorized abortion is regarded manslaughter form the Islamic Sharia law." Unconfirmed reports suggest that between 300,000 and 500,000 abortions are carried out in Iran every year. Intentional abortion contravenes Islamic Sharia and the culture of valuing human life. As per Article 56 of Iran's Family Protection and Youth Population Law, an abortion without a license is punishable by fine, imprisonment, and revocation of the medical license, and the coroner's office is responsible for filing the case for the applicants.

Iranian film 'Parisan' awarded at Indian Festival

Iranian film 'Parisan', directed by Kambiz Babaei, won the best director, best actor, best actress and special jury award at the Kollywood International Film Festival held in India. Kambiz Babaei won the award for best director, Farhad Qaemian won the award for best actor, and Linda

Kiani won the award for best actress. The special jury award was also given to this film, ILNA reported. The Indian festival featured 923 films from forty different countries, including prominent works from America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. The festival is based on South India Tamil cinema.

