

Julani's journey; a story of change and power



8 >



Iran Daily

Vol. 7718 • Monday, December 9, 2024 • Azar 19, 1403 • Jumada al-Thani 7, 1446 • 100,000 rials • 8 pages



irandaily.ir

newspaper.irandaily.ir

IranDailyWeb

Oil, gas to meet half of global energy needs by 2050: *Paknejad*

2 >

Iran will not abandon Syria, its people

By Mohsen Mousavizadeh
Iranian lawmaker
OPINION EXCLUSIVE

In recent years, Syria and its people have staunchly aligned with the axis of resistance and Iran, with its leaders forging a robust alliance with Tehran. This strategic partnership has drawn the ire of numerous nations, particularly the Zionist regime and its allies. As a result, adversaries have relentlessly sought to topple the ruling system in Syria through various means. Over the past decade, the presence of General Qassem Soleimani and the forces of the resistance front, including the Popular Mobilization Forces, Fatemiyoun, and others, played a crucial role in thwarting these destabilization efforts. Despite extensive backing and planning, Daesh failed to gain control over Syria and was eventually eradicated, although it caused extensive damage to the country's infrastructure.

Page 8 >



Hamas orders data gathering on captives prior to cease-fire deal

7 >



Tehran, Kuwait could raise trade to \$1b per annum: *Senior businessman*

2 >

Axis of resilience

Israel is underestimating Iran, its allies

SPECIAL ISSUE 4-5 >



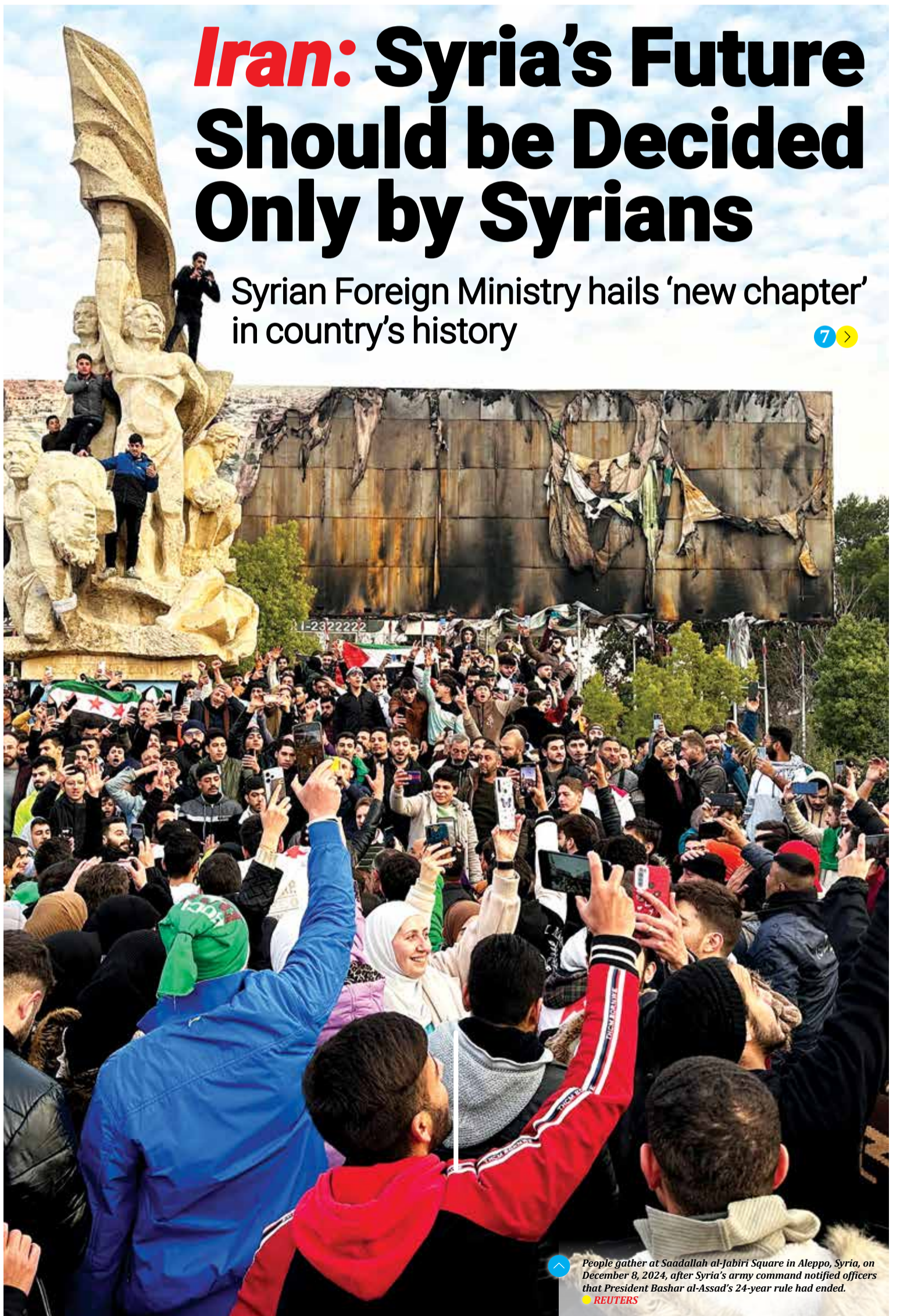
Persian Gulf Pro League: Persepolis stunned by Nassaji; Esteghlal continues revival under Mosimane

6 >



Wonders of Ferdows Garden; historical treasures and cinematic marvels

3 >



Iran: Syria's Future Should be Decided Only by Syrians

Syrian Foreign Ministry hails 'new chapter' in country's history

7 >

People gather at Saadallah al-Jabiri Square in Aleppo, Syria, on December 8, 2024, after Syria's army command notified officers that President Bashar al-Assad's 24-year rule had ended. REUTERS

Iran ready to transfer agricultural technology to Uzbekistan

Economy Desk

Iran's Minister of Agriculture Gholamreza Nouri-Qezeljah expressed readiness to strengthen cooperation with Uzbekistan in areas such as potato production and processing, seed exports, and the transfer of agricultural technology. Nouri-Qezeljah made the remarks during a meeting with a delegation from Uzbekistan's ministries of agriculture, trade and investment, IRNA reported. He noted that the strategic vision of Iran's current government is focused on expanding relations with other countries, adding that Uzbekistan's president's initiative to foster international ties has created significant opportunities for constructive collaboration between the two nations.

Nouri-Qezeljah also expressed Iran's willingness to supply the agricultural machinery needed by Uzbekistan, and emphasized that cooperation could include both direct exports of products and barter deals involving items like potatoes and legumes.

Highlighting Iran's century-long tradition of agricultural research, he said Iran is ready to share its experience in agricultural research with Uzbekistan and offer joint educational and study opportunities for Uzbek experts.

Speaking at the meeting, Ibrohim Ergashev, the head of plant protection and quarantine agency of Uzbekistan's Ministry of Agriculture, emphasized the importance of strengthening economic ties between the two nations.

He stated that Uzbekistan is determined to enhance trade relations with Iran and has already made the necessary preparations.

During the meeting, Argashev noted that Uzbekistan imports between 600,000 to 700,000 tons of potatoes annually. He expressed interest in purchasing the product directly from Iran. He also pointed out that in recent years, indirect potato imports from Iran to Uzbekistan have increased, underscoring the high quality and competitiveness of Iranian potatoes.

Due to their quality, competitive pricing, and large volume, Iranian potatoes are suitable to meet Uzbekistan's demand.

Referring to the growth of trade in agricultural products, he announced that the volume of imports from Iran has doubled compared to last year and reached 68 million dollars.

Considering Iran's capabilities in the field of agriculture, new technologies, machinery export and Uzbekistan's extensive needs in these fields, more cooperations are expected to lead to economic development and improvement of food security in both countries.

Oil, gas to meet half of global energy needs by 2050: *Paknejad*

Oil and gas will still meet at least half of the world's energy needs by 2050, said the country's Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad, addressing the 26th Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) Ministerial Meeting which was held in Tehran on Sunday.

He called the GECF Ministerial Meeting one of the most significant events in the global gas industry, providing an opportunity for members and experts to exchange ideas and strengthen cooperation, Shana reported.

Paknejad also welcomed newly appointed ministers from Bolivia, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Russia, Venezuela, Mauritania, Peru, and Senegal.

The minister highlighted the need for balanced energy policies and warned against a rushed transition from fossil fuels to non-fossil alternatives.

"Attempts to eliminate or replace fossil fuels are unrealistic and pose a threat to global energy security," he stated.

The minister also underscored the growing role of natural gas in meeting global energy demands, with the GECF forecasting that it will account for 26% of the global energy mix by 2050. However, he cautioned that achieving this goal requires substantial investment in the natural gas sector, particularly in the face of current energy policies and ongoing global challenges. Paknejad highlighted the importance of increasing



investments in natural gas infrastructure to ensure long-term global energy stability.

Iran, one of the world's leading natural gas producers, has made significant progress in expanding its gas production capacity despite sanctions, he said, noting that Iran's natural gas production has reached 275 billion cubic meters per year, with gas now constituting over 70% of the country's energy mix.

He reaffirmed Iran's commitment to developing sustainable, environmentally friendly methods for natural gas extraction and utilization. "We are determined to lead in advancing technologies that enhance the efficiency of gas extraction while minimizing environmental impact," Paknejad said.

Paknejad concluded by highlighting the importance of continued dialogue and cooperation among GECF

member states to address the challenges facing the global energy market.

"The GECF has the will and readiness to play a more effective role in the global gas and energy markets," he said.

Also, Mohamed Hamel, the secretary general of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), speaking at the event highlighted the organization's growth and future goals.

The secretary general re-

flected on the GECF's origins in Tehran in 2001, where the organization was founded as a global platform for natural gas cooperation.

Hamel noted the remarkable growth in global natural gas demand, which has surged by 70% since the GECF's creation.

He added that natural gas consumption reached record levels in 2023 and is expected to increase by 34% by 2050.



Iranian Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad speaks at the 26th Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) Ministerial Meeting in Tehran on December 8, 2024.

● SHANA

"The importance of natural gas as a clean, reliable, and flexible energy source has never been more evident," Hamel said, reiterating the GECF's mission to promote natural gas as a key element in sustainable development, energy, and food security.

Tehran, Kuwait could raise trade to \$1b per annum: *Senior businessman*



By Sadeq Dehqan & Reza Abesh Ahmadlou
Staff writers

The vice president of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber of Commerce highlighted the positive prospect of economic relations between the two countries, noting that bilateral trade could annually reach \$1 billion. In an interview with Iran Daily, Arash Nikpey stated that Iran and Kuwait boast significant potential to expand economic

and trade cooperation.

"By leveraging these opportunities and addressing existing trade challenges, bilateral exchanges can rise and achieve substantial growth," he said. Nikpey noted that Iran's highest export volume to Kuwait occurred in 2018, when exports reached \$350 million. However, since then, trade volumes have declined, stabilizing at around \$200 million annually for the past two to three years. Historically, Iran and Kuwait

have maintained strong trade and cultural ties, he added, noting that given Kuwait's significant Shia population, the two nations share cultural proximity, which has also fostered robust religious tourism links. Nikpey pointed out that relations improved during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, as Iran sided with Kuwait in the conflict. Nevertheless, Kuwait's cautious diplomatic stance among Persian Gulf Arab states

has sometimes hindered closer ties.

The trader also acknowledged that recent political and economic challenges, including sanctions on Iran, negatively impacted regional relations. "However, under the administration of the late Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi, ties began to recover. For instance, Kuwait appointed an ambassador to Tehran after a seven-year hiatus, signaling a shift toward better relations."

Nikpey called for the resumption of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Economic Commission, which has not convened in years. "Reviving this commission could pave the way for a shared economic vision and provide a roadmap for strategic cooperation," he said.

Addressing visa issuance challenges for Iranian citizens, Nikpey emphasized that resolving these issues would significantly enhance trade and economic exchanges, making the \$1 billion trade target achievable.

Kuwait's reliance on imports for most of its food and industrial needs makes it an attractive market for Iranian exporters. "Nearly all goods have export potential to Kuwait," Nikpey ex-

plained. However, he noted that Kuwait's high purchasing power and stringent product standards require exporters to meet quality expectations.

Iranian food products have historically been popular in Kuwait due to shared tastes, and demand for Iranian construction materials has also grown in recent years, the trader explained. Nikpey urged Iranian exporters to focus on effective marketing strategies to have greater presence in Kuwait's industrial product market. However, high transportation costs remain a barrier. "Iran's transport fleet primarily serves routes to the UAE and Oman, with less heading toward Kuwait, driving up shipping expenses," he said.

Despite logistical hurdles, Iran has access to Kuwait via Iraq's Basra, Abdeli, and Safwan borders, the trader said, noting that the lack of operational connections, partly due to Iraq's incomplete implementation of the TIR Convention—a global customs transit system—has limited progress.

Nikpey concluded by suggesting that a joint meeting among transportation officials from Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait could help open trade routes, reducing costs and boosting economic ties.

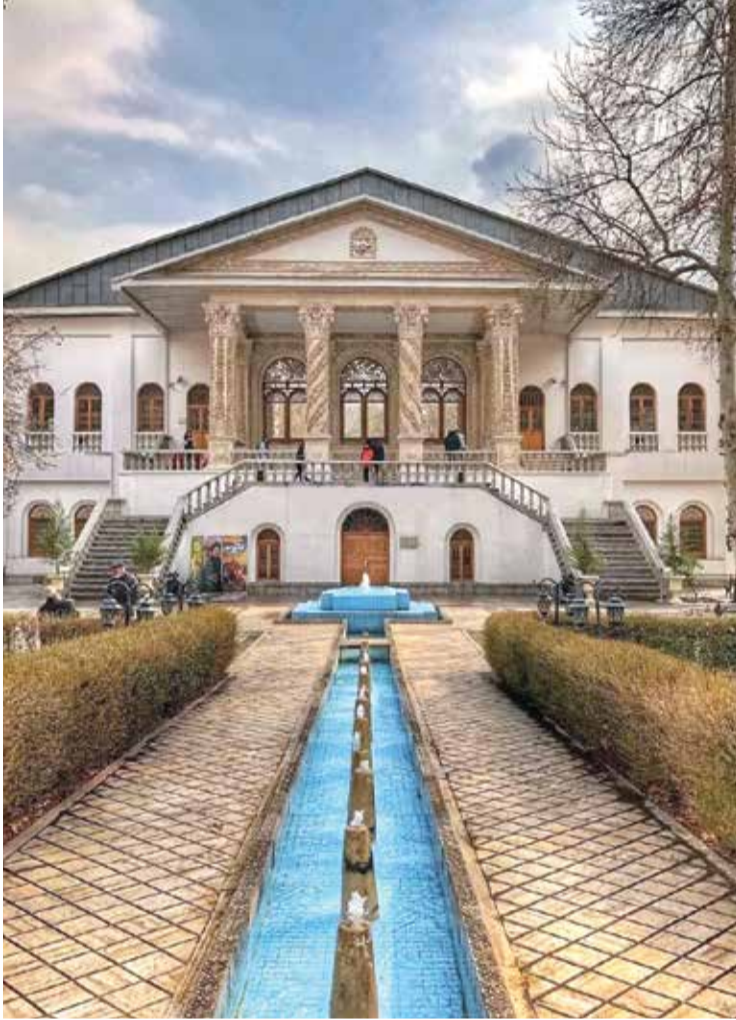
Wonders of Ferdows Garden; historical treasures and cinematic marvels

Ferdows Garden is a historical complex located on Valiasr Street near Tajrish Square in Tehran. It consists

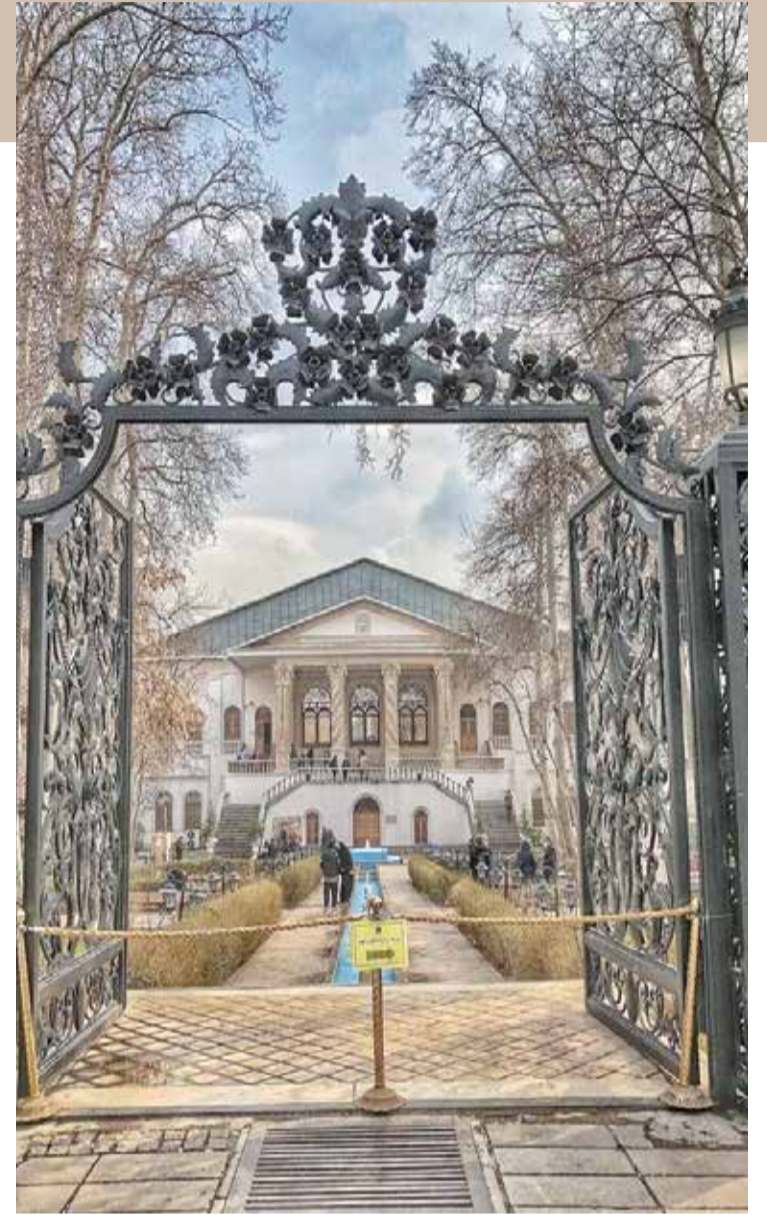
of a public park, a mansion, and the Cinema Museum of Iran. Built during the Qajar era, the complex features

lush green spaces and a corridor fountain. In 1997, it was added to the Iran National Heritage List. Ferdows

Garden is one of Tehran's architectural landmarks and is among the city's most-visited tourist attractions.



destinationiran.com



destinationiran.com

History

Mohammad Shah, the third Qajar king, ordered the construction of a residential castle in Shemiran. However, he passed away before its completion, and the building was never finished. Following his death, other members of the royal court built personal residences nearby. Among them was Hossein Ali Khan, the royal treasurer and chief coiner, who opted to construct a two-story Qajar-style mansion on the northern side of the current complex. The main mansion included seven sections, each adorned with pools and several fountains.

Upon Nasereddin Shah's ascension, ownership of the mansion transferred to Hossein Ali Khan's son, Doust Ali Khan, who named it Ferdows. He commissioned architects from Isfahan and Yazd to design a new mansion in the southern section, known as Reshk-e Behesht (Envy of Paradise). The staircase and parts of the facade were embellished with marble from Yazd, while the interior featured elegant gold leaf decorations. The next owner, Mohammad Doust Khan, largely neglected the structure, leading to deterioration. The marble stones were removed and repurposed for the Amirieh Mansion (Nezam School), and the original mansion was demolished. The property changed hands several times over the years, destinationiran.com wrote.

In 1900, during Mozaffareddin Shah's reign, Mohammad Vali Khan Tonekaboni, leader of the Constitutional Revolutionary Forces from northern Iran, purchased the mansion. He renovated its defunct qanat, building a portal with a grand facade at its entrance, and added flat pools and fountains to the complex.

In 1937, the Education Ministry purchased the building and converted it into Shapur High School of Tajrish. By 1972, the complex was transformed into a cultural center and exhibition space. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance took control of the complex.

Architecture

The architecture of Ferdows Garden exemplifies the Qajar style, blending modern aesthetics with traditional Persian designs. The layout is inspired by the concept of the Persian Garden, following the chaharbagh (four gardens) design, which segments the area with water channels and stone pathways. Notable features of this style include symmetry and geometric patterns, evoking harmony and tranquility, while integrating nature into the urban landscape.

Pavilions and arches: The garden fea-

tures charming pavilions adorned with exquisitely crafted arches and intricate plasterwork, characteristic of Qajar architecture. These spaces offer shaded areas for relaxation and serve as focal points to appreciate the garden's beauty.

Columns and pillars: The mansion boasts elegant columns that reflect the classic proportions and grandeur of Persian architecture, infusing the space with an atmosphere of royalty and sophistication.

Water features: Water is integral to the Persian Garden, represented through canals, fountains, and reflective pools. These

elements create a serene ambiance and highlight the essential relationship between water and vegetation.

Landscape design: The landscaping of Ferdows Garden adheres to Persian horticultural principles, emphasizing floral diversity. The thoughtful arrangement of trees, plants, and flowers enhances visual appeal and invites a symphony of scents, immersing visitors in this cultural oasis.

Use of traditional materials: The architecture incorporates local materials like brick and stone, showcasing craftsmanship passed down through generations.

Cultural significance

The Qajar architectural style of Ferdows Garden is not only visually striking; it narrates the story of a civilization deeply connected to nature. The blend of modernity and tradition signifies the emergence of a contemporary era while honoring historical roots. Each element within the garden embodies cultural value, emphasizing the importance of nature in social and artistic expression.

Ferdows Garden stands out as a mas-

terful synthesis of traditional Persian aesthetics and modern influences, reflecting a cohesive design philosophy centered around symmetry, geometric patterns, and the harmonious relationship between the natural and built environments.

Together, these elements create a sanctuary that celebrates beauty and culture. Visitors to Ferdows Garden are invited to engage with this architectural marvel and experience a sense of peace and connection to Iran's rich historical legacy.

Cinema museum of Iran

The Cinema Museum of Iran, located within the picturesque Ferdows Garden, serves as a vibrant testament to the country's rich cinematic history and cultural heritage. Established to preserve and celebrate the art of film, the museum functions as both an educational resource and a cultural hub for cinema enthusiasts.

Founded in 1999, the museum's establishment marked a significant milestone in recognizing the evolution of Iranian cinema and its influential figures over the decades. It offers visitors an insightful journey through the development of film in Iran, from its early beginnings to contemporary productions.

Design

The museum is thoughtfully organized into thematic zones, each highlighting different aspects of Iranian cinema — historical, cultural, and artistic. This structure enhances the visitor experience by guiding them through a narrative that unfolds over time.

The interior features spacious galleries designed for flexible exhibit arrangements, encouraging exploration and interaction. Visitors are invited to engage with various installations and displays.

While honoring its historical roots, the design masterfully integrates modern architectural styles. Large glass panels and open spaces create a sense of transparency and connection with the surrounding garden, allowing natural light to flood the interiors. This modern touch symbolizes the evolution of Iranian cinema within a contemporary global context.



yjc.ir

Integration with Ferdows Garden

The museum's architecture seamlessly connects with the lush landscapes of Ferdows Garden. Outdoor seating areas and pathways encourage visitors to enjoy nature while reflecting on their cinematic journey inside. This integration underscores the importance of nature in Persian culture and art, enhancing the overall ambiance.

The museum also incorporates modern sustainability practices. Features such as energy-efficient lighting, rainwater harvesting systems, and materials sourced with minimal environmental impact reflect a commitment to ecological responsibility. This focus on sustainability complements the museum's role as a cultural institution dedicated to the future of Iranian cinema.

Exhibits and collections

The museum boasts a diverse range of exhibits that celebrate key milestones in Iranian cinema, including:

Film artifacts: Visitors can explore an extensive collection of archival materials, including posters, scripts, cameras, and costumes. These artifacts provide insight into the creative processes and artistic expressions that have shaped Iranian film.

Interactive displays: Engaging exhibits immerse visitors in the cinematic experience through multimedia installations that highlight key films, genres, and directors. Interactive screens offer information about notable achievements in Iranian cinema.

Tributes to icons: The museum pays homage to celebrated Iranian filmmakers and actors who have significantly contributed to the industry's development. Dedicated sections showcase their works, biographies, and the lasting impact they have had on both national and international cinema.

Screening rooms: The museum includes intimate screening spaces where classic Iranian films and contemporary works are showcased. These screenings not only entertain but also serve as educational opportunities for visitors to understand the evolution of storytelling through film.

Cultural impact

The Cinema Museum of Iran plays a vital role in fostering appreciation for the country's unique cinematic language and themes. It highlights cross-cultural influences, social narratives, and artistic movements present in Iranian films. This cultural emphasis encourages dialogue around identity, history, and the evolving societal landscape of Iran.



Demonstrators rally to show solidarity with Palestinians and Hezbollah, in Sanaa, Yemen, in November 2024.

● KHALED ABDULLAH/
REUTERS

Axis of resilience

Israel is underestimating Iran, its allies



By Renad Mansour
Scholar

OPINION

In response to Hamas's October 7 attack last year, the Israeli cabinet launched a regional war meant to reshape the Middle East. Israel specifically targeted the so-called Axis of Resistance, a network of groups allied with Iran that includes Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Ansarullah (Houthis) in Yemen, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. Working on a scale that dwarfs previous efforts against the Axis, Israel has spent the past year trying to destroy the network's political, economic, military, logistical, and communications infrastructure. It has also undertaken an unprecedented campaign against the Axis's leadership, killing the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah and several senior commanders in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The ferocity of the Israeli offensive, which has been bolstered by advanced technologies and a strategy of total war that flattens and depopulates neighborhoods and cities, will significantly alter the balance of power in the Middle East. Yet, for all its military superiority, not to mention its support from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe, Israel is unlikely to eradicate the organizations and regimes that belong to the Axis in the way it hopes. Time and again the Axis has demonstrated an adaptability and a resilience that attest to the deep connections its member groups maintain within their own states and societies. What's more, the transnational relationships that compose the Axis mean that Hamas, Hezbollah, and the other member organizations are best understood not merely as discrete nonstate actors or insurgent armed groups but as interlinking nodes of durable political, economic, military, and ideological networks.

These networks, which are regional and sometimes even global, have allowed the members of the Axis to accommodate various shocks, including military setbacks, such as the assassination by the United States of its de facto leader, Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020; economic collapses, such as the crippling sanctions from US president Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign and the Lebanese banking crash of 2019, which dissolved the financial accounts of many member groups; and uprisings, such as the protests that at various times contested the authority of the Axis in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza. Despite these challenges, Axis members — and the Axis as a whole — have drawn on support from their local states and communities and from one another to survive. The historical resilience of the Axis of Resistance suggests that Israel will find it difficult to eliminate groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. In all likelihood, the Israeli strategy of total war will continue to yield short-term tactical victories that degrade the capabilities of armed groups and states, forcing them into a kind of survival mode for a time. But without a political solution that comes to terms with the social embeddedness of the groups, the Axis will likely draw again on local sources of influence, along with its transnational connections, to reconfigure itself at the local and regional levels. Since October 7, in fact, smaller groups within the Axis have seized the moment to strengthen their alliances. While Hamas, Hezbollah, and the IRGC endure the brunt of the Israeli offensives, groups such as Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen have capitalized on the turmoil to emerge as formidable regional players.

Resilience through adaptation

The Axis of Resistance as it exists today differs significantly from the network that was initially established in the 1980s. Back then, the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran founded and fostered Hez-

bollah in Lebanon as a means of projecting power. Its aim was to "export the revolution" and employ "forward defense" through asymmetric deterrence against perceived threats, namely Israel. Iran strategically replicated this model across various countries. Around the same time that it founded Hezbollah, for instance, Iran established Iraqi Shia groups such as the Badr Corps, which played a role in toppling Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's regime and seizing power in post-2003 Iraq. In the 1990s, Iran bolstered Palestinian factions such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas, thereby helping enhance their influence. And in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, Iran extended its support to Assad in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, further solidifying its regional network. What fundamentally sustained these groups was a deep reliance on their local governing regimes and social bases. They embedded themselves within the fabric of their respective states to such an extent that the formal heads of government in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Gaza are all either members of groups that belong to the Axis or were chosen with those groups' support. Furthermore, transnational ties among the groups have served as a crucial insurance policy during periods of shock. An early test of the Axis came in 1992 when Israel assassinated Abbas al-Musawi, who was the secretary-general of Hezbollah. At the time, a major Israeli newspaper proclaimed that "the era of conflict with Hezbollah in its comfortable playground

has ended." Despite the attack, however, Hezbollah was able to reconstitute itself. The party leveraged local support by rallying the Lebanese Shia community and securing backing from Iran, which provided financial aid, military training, and strategic guidance. This robust support network enabled Hezbollah to not only recover but also expand its influence. Under the guidance of its Shura Council and Hassan Nasrallah, Musawi's successor, Hezbollah eventually became strong enough that it was able to force Israel from Lebanese territory in 2000. This triumph, coupled with the 2006 war in which Hezbollah fought Israel to a standstill — an unprecedented feat for Arab armed groups — greatly enhanced its reputation. It also ushered in a formidable new incarnation of the Axis of Resistance. Another challenge to the Axis came in 2011 when the Assad regime in Syria faced an existential threat in the form of a war. Protests against the regime, which initially sought reforms, were followed by an armed uprising fought by groups — with backing from Turkey and the Persian Gulf states — demanding regime change. Once again, however, the Axis was able to adapt in ways that allowed it to overcome this crisis. Assad was aided in part by important connections that the Axis made with states outside the region: most significantly, Russia came to Assad's rescue and became an influential global partner for the network. But Assad's regime also benefited from the assistance of other Axis members. Under the strategic di-



rection of General Soleimani, the IRGC's Quds Force, along with Iraqi Shia armed groups, began constructing a vital land bridge to transport supplies, weapons, and personnel from Iran and Iraq into Syria. Hezbollah fighters were eventually deployed to the frontlines of the Syrian war, where they played a crucial role in quelling the armed uprising. (Although initially reluctant to enter the Syrian conflict because of opposition from its local supporters, Hezbollah was compelled by Iran to intervene.) As Assad's government teetered on the brink of collapse, Hezbollah stepped in decisively to safeguard the regime and prevent the emergence of a new regime in Damascus that would be hostile to the Axis. The 2011 uprisings also led to the Houthis' formal integration into the Axis of Resistance. Following the overthrow of Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Ira-



The historical resilience of the Axis of Resistance suggests that Israel will find it difficult to eliminate groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. In all likelihood, the Israeli strategy of total war will continue to yield short-term tactical victories that degrade the capabilities of armed groups and states, forcing them into a kind of survival mode for a time. But without a political solution that comes to terms with the social embeddedness of the groups, the Axis will likely draw again on local sources of influence, along with its transnational connections, to reconfigure itself at the local and regional levels.



Women wave flags of Lebanon and Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah in front of portraits of the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei (R) and Hezbollah's late leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah, in the southern Lebanese town of Bint Jbeil on August 13, 2016.

● MAHMOUD ZAYYAT/AFP

nian support became instrumental in transforming the Houthis from a local armed group into a formidable military force. By providing financial aid, advanced weaponry, and military training, Iran enabled the Houthis to enhance their operational capabilities. This assistance, coupled with local support bases, allowed the Houthis to seize control of Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, in 2014 and to maintain their dominance against a Saudi-led coalition. In addition to military attacks, the Axis of Resistance has also faced economic assaults in the form of sanctions. During the early years of this century, Iran's nuclear ambitions and its growing influence prompted an international coalition led by the United States to levy new sanctions against Iran and its allies within the Axis. The sanctions increased dramatically in 2018 when Trump reneged on the Iran nuclear deal and launched his Maximum Pressure campaign. This campaign was intended in part to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero, thereby stripping the regime of a crucial revenue source. The sanctions devastated Iran's economy, but they did not halt the regime's oil trade. Instead, Tehran found ways to sell its oil through informal markets. With the help of its allies in the Axis of



People participate in a huge pro-Palestinian protest against the escalating Israeli military aggressions in Gaza, in Sanaa, Yemen, on November 10, 2023.

● MOHAMMED HAMOUD/
GETTY IMAGES



ing intensity not only against Hamas but also against Hezbollah, Iran, the Assad regime, and other Axis members. Yet, its actions over the past year suggest that Israel has strategically underestimated the resilience of the network and the extent to which a military solution, even one not constrained by international law, can bring about societal change in other countries. The past year has proved that the network is, to a meaningful extent, still able to adapt to military and economic challenges. While many of its member groups will remain underground or close to home during this period of intense conflict, they will nonetheless continue to draw on domestic support, on other members of the network across the region, and on global allies such as Russia and China. To eradicate the network fully is an impossible task and would likely require, at a minimum, demolishing, occupying, and reestablishing new states wherever the groups are embedded. For a country such as Israel, which has been accused of war crimes at the International Criminal Court and the United Nations, that sort of effort would prompt blowback from key allies and the international community. History suggests that Israel's military actions are unlikely to succeed without a comprehensive political solution, especially when those actions are conducted outside its own territory. Instead, the Israeli

Resistance, Iran used these markets to trade energy resources, fund military operations, and gain access to US dollars. In Iraq, for example, Iran worked with the rest of the Axis to combine Iranian and non-Iranian fuel before selling it to countries in Asia. The revenues from this trade allowed Iran to purchase weapons components and ship them to its allies throughout the region. It also gave the Axis additional global connections in the form of Chinese oil buyers. The last major challenge that the Axis of Resistance faced before Israel's post-October 7 offensive against Hamas and Hezbollah was the assassination of General Soleimani by the United States in January 2020. General Soleimani had helped found the Axis, and his role as its de facto leader, as well as his top-down command style, meant that his death was a major setback for Iran and its allies. Yet, even though the attack sent shockwaves through the network — Axis member groups in Iraq went underground — in the end, it demonstrated the adaptability of the Axis to deal with serious threats.

After General Soleimani's death, the Axis transitioned from a top-down Iranian-driven network into a more horizontally integrated alliance. Iran retained a pivotal role in setting the Axis's strategic direction, but the new structure allowed the other members greater autonomy and more independent interactions with both Tehran and one another. In the reformed axis, Hezbollah's Nasrallah became an important broker: he provided regular strategic guidance to Esmail Qaani, General Soleimani's

successor. Qaani aimed to transform the Axis into a more formal and coherent institution, empowering its members to take greater control and operate as equals. (This goal was helped, somewhat inadvertently, by the fact that Qaani had neither General Soleimani's deep-rooted personal connections nor his proficiency in Arabic, which made Nasrallah's guidance even more crucial.)

In Iraq, for instance, Nasrallah and his representative, Mohammad al-Kawtharani, emerged as key advisers to the Baghdad government. They helped quell the Tishreen (October) Uprising that had erupted a few months before General Soleimani's assassination, in which protesters demanded an end to the Iran-allied post-2003 governing regime. Nasrallah and Kawtharani helped fortify the regime against popular protest. During this period, Kawtharani also significantly expanded Hezbollah's economic interests across Iraq, thereby filling the void left by General Soleimani's death. These changes, although driven by a negative shock, reshaped the Axis once again.

Responding to Israel's total war

The previous threats to the Axis of Resistance pale in comparison to the total war that Israel launched in response to Hamas's October 7 attack. As before, however, the Axis was forced to adapt for its own survival. In particular, it has continued to transition to a more horizontal command structure and has further tightened its transnational connections.

To a much greater degree than in previous conflicts, Israel's war against Hamas and Hezbollah has drawn a strong response from other allies within the Axis, such

as the Houthis and Kataib Hezbollah, which has its roots in the Badr Corps of the 1980s and is currently linked to the PMF in Iraq. Previously, these groups were peripheral to the broader dynamics in Middle Eastern conflicts. Over the past year, however, they have deepened both their autonomy and their regional influence.

The Houthis, for instance, began for the first time to use anti-ship ballistic missiles to disrupt commercial shipping routes. They attacked ships traveling through the Red Sea, forcing freight companies to reroute around Africa, which led to increased costs and delays in the delivery of energy, food, and consumer goods around the world.

Kataib Hezbollah has also sought more involvement and influence in the transnational arena as Hamas and Hezbollah came under attack. In a move that challenged popular conceptions of its role as an Iranian proxy, the group killed three US service members in January 2024 along the Jordanian-Syrian border in an attack on a US military outpost known as Tower 22. This action was undertaken against the wishes of the IRGC, which subsequently pleaded with Kataib Hezbollah to call a cease-fire. The attack nevertheless revealed a new configuration of the Axis that involved more proactive and autonomous decision-making from its members.

The post-October 7 reorientation has also fostered closer ties among some of the members of the Axis of Resistance. For several years, the Houthis maintained only a nominal presence in Iraq, with a single representative in

Baghdad. That envoy's work seemed more symbolic than substantive. In response to Israeli offensives against Hamas and Hezbollah, however, the Houthis deepened their collaboration with the PMF. This intensified cooperation saw an increase in weapons sharing and joint operations and showcased an enhanced capability to attack Israel. Members of the Axis also worked together across borders more



Emergency personnel walk outside a US Embassy branch office situated near the site of a drone blast that killed one man and injured at least 10 others in Tel Aviv, Israel, on July 19, 2024.

● RICARDO MORAES/REUTERS



Members of Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah movement attend a funeral in Baghdad, Iraq, on November 21, 2023.

● AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP

concertedly following the assassination of Nasrallah in September. In the aftermath of his death, dozens of Hezbollah's economic elites and their families relocated to southern Iraq, traveling by land through Syria with Assad's assistance. They quickly found places to resettle as Hezbollah had increased its business activities in Iraq after General Soleimani's death, including making investments in infrastructure, land, and residential complexes. These economic links allowed Hezbollah's elites to move out of the direct line of fire in Lebanon while continuing to generate revenue. Once more, the Axis's transnational connections provided a crucial lifeline for its members during a period of profound difficulty.

Need for accountability

Israel, of course, understands the transnational nature of the Axis of Resistance. It is precisely because of this understanding that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet embarked on its total war strategy in response to October 7, a strategy that involved offensives of vary-



People walk by the painted posters of the former Hamas leader Ahmad Yassin (1), the former chief of the Iranian Quds Force General Qassem Soleimani (2nd-L), the former chief of Lebanon's Hezbollah Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah (2nd-R), and the Houthi leader Mahdi al-Mashat in Sanaa, Yemen, in January 2024.

● AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP

campaign will probably result in an even more unstable Middle East, one in which genuine peace is only a distant possibility. Israeli massacres of civilians, which have been condemned by the United Nations and by human rights organizations, have proved devastating for civil society and are being used by Axis groups to foster their ideology of resistance. Rather than enabling Israel's ruthless strategy, therefore, international actors need to find a political settlement that begins with a cease-fire to the bloody wars in Gaza and Lebanon. The next step should be to bring in the governments linked to the Axis to negotiate a broader settlement that takes into account the true nature of the power dynamics in the region. Without such an inclusive approach, regional conflict in the Middle East is destined to persist, to the detriment of future generations.

The full article first appeared on Foreign Affairs.



Persian Gulf Pro League:

Persepolis stunned by Nassaji; Esteghlal continues revival under Mosimane

Sports Desk

A run of poor results and performances continued for Persepolis as the Persian Gulf Pro League champion suffered a 1-0 home defeat against bottom club Nassaji Mazandaran.

Meanwhile, Esteghlal's resurgence gained momentum under head coach Pisto Mosimane thanks to an impressive 2-0 away victory over Foolad Khuzestan in Ahvaz.

At Shahr-e Qods Stadium, Persepolis frontline, spearheaded by Issa Alekassir, was wasteful again, while Nassaji's Brazilian goalkeeper Luan Polli was in dazzling form, as Kevin Yamga's 25th-minute strike was enough to secure a first victory of the campaign for the northern Iranian club.

The visiting side went down to 10 men with 16 minutes left after midfielder Alexander Merkel was dismissed for dissent, but the home side still failed to capitalize on the advantage, struggling to break through Nassaji's solid backline.

There were more red cards in the stoppage time with Nassaji's Armin Sohrabian and Persepolis fullback Ayoub El Amloud receiving marching orders for a second booking.

A second league defeat of the season heaped further pressure on Spanish head coach Juan Car-



Persepolis winger Oston Urunov is frustrated during a 1-0 loss to Nassaji Mazandaran in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Tehran, Iran, on Dec. 7, 2024.
● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

los Garrido, despite a promising start to his reign on Persepolis bench.

The disappointing run in the AFC Champions League Elite,

coupled with the team's insipid displays and defensive vulnerabilities, has put Garrido under scrutiny in recent weeks, and with crucial away

games against Malavan and Sepahan on the horizon, the Spaniard faces a race against time to turn the Reds' fortunes around.

Blues on the rise

The woeful early days of the new season under Javad Nekounam now seem like a distant memory for Esteghlal fans, after their

team built on a decent performance in the away draw against Saudi giant Al Ahli to walk away with a massive victory at Foolad Khuzestan.

Brazilian center-back Raphael Silva headed home on a corner-kick with three minutes into the game at Foolad Arena, before Amirali Sadeqi put the Blues in the driving seat midway through the first half with a superb strike from the edge of the box.

Uzbekistan international Jaloliddin Masharipov delivered a man-of-the-match performance by dictating the tempo in the middle of the pitch to help Esteghlal claim a fourth win in 11 league outings and move up to eighth in the top-flight table.

With Mosimane's evolution picking up pace, Esteghlal supporters are still hopeful their team will return to the title race in the coming weeks.

Next for Esteghlal is a home tie against Mes Kerman in the Hazfi Cup on Wednesday before the Blues host Golgozar Sirjan on their return to league action on Sunday.

Wrestling wunderkind Khalili demonstrates credentials for senior success

Sports Desk

The final showdown of the Iranian Premier League marked another significant milestone in the rapid rise of wrestling prodigy Sina Khalili, who is making a strong case for a place in the country's freestyle national team.

A world and Asian under-17 champion last year, Khalili stole all the headlines when he outclassed two-time world senior silver medalist Amir-Mohammad Yazdani 14-5 in a thrilling 70kg bout to inspire Saipa to a comeback victory over Shahr Bank at the Azadi 12,000-seater Hall in Tehran on Friday. The 18-year-old had be-

gun the day with a 2-1 win against Kurban Shiraev in the semifinals, making up for the 5-2 loss to the Russian at the Poddubny Wrestling League 7 in Moscow in November.

Khalili was to represent the country at the World U23 event in October, but had to skip the tournament to fill in for injured Yazdani at the Seniors World Championships.

He got off to flying start in Tirana, defeating Belarusian Niurgun Skriabin and former world bronze medalist Alibek Osmonov of Kyrgyzstan by technical superiority, though he ultimately finished his campaign empty-handed following a 6-5 loss to

Tajikistan's Russian-born Abdulmazhid Kudiev in the quarterfinals.

His brave and impressive performances in the Albanian capital still convinced head coach Pejman Dorostkar to name him in the Iranian squad for the head-to-head against Russia.

"Sina was exceptional today," Saipa head coach Gholamreza Mohammadi said of his performance in the league on Friday, adding: "He is one of the bright talents in the new generation of Iranian wrestlers."

"This is just his first year in the junior level, though he is already a contender for a seniors' national

team spot, as he is keen on world and Olympic glory in the near future," added the four-time world medalist.

Khalili's display on Friday was reminiscent of reigning world super-heavyweight champion Amirhossein Zare's rise to prominence back in the 2019 edition of the Iranian league, when he, at 18 years of age, overcame a nine-point deficit to beat then-world champion Geno Petriashvili.



Sina Khalili (L) is seen ahead of a freestyle 70kg bout in the Iranian Wrestling Premier League in Tehran, Iran, on Dec. 6, 2024.
● IAWF



Iran's Pakdaman drops to 11th in FIE World Ranking

Sports Desk

Iranian fencer Ali Pakdaman descended by two spots to sit 11th in the men's senior saber category of the FIE World Rankings.

The latest ranking was released after the conclusion of the Grand Prix Nuoma in France, where Pakdaman, 34,

defeated Polish fencer Marcel Broniszewski 15-13 but suffered a 15-9 loss to Yago Moran of Spain in the round of 32.

South Korea's Oh Sang-uk – a team and individual gold medalist at the Paris Olympics – topped the ranking, with Tunisian Farès Ferjani, who was beaten by the

South Korean in the Olympic final, and Ziad Elsisy of Egypt in the following spots.

Pakdaman was part of the Iranian men's saber squad that reached the team semifinals at the Paris Games, but missed out on the podium after a last-four defeat against Hungary was

followed by a loss to the host in the bronze medal contest.

Pakdaman then spearheaded the country to a team silver medal at the at the FIE Coupe du Monde last month, courtesy of defeat against South Korea in the final showpiece in Oran, Algeria.

Iran: Syria's future should be decided only by Syrians

Syrian Foreign Ministry hails 'new chapter' in country's history

International Desk

Iran's Foreign Ministry in a statement reacted to the fall of the Syrian government on Sunday, saying that Syria's future should be decided only by its people and without "foreign imposition or destructive intervention."

The statement came after militant groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) captured the capital Damascus after days of advance against government forces, which led to the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's government.

"In light of the recent developments in Syria, Iran's Foreign Ministry, while recalling Iran's principled stance on respecting the unity, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Syria, emphasizes that determining the fate and making decisions about the future of Syria is solely the responsibility of the people of this country, without destructive interference or foreign imposition," the statement said.

National dialogue

"In order to achieve this important [issue], it is necessary to end military conflicts as soon as possible, prevent terrorist acts, and initiate national dialogue with the participation of all segments of Syrian society to form an inclusive government that represents all Syrian people," it said.

Pointing to deep-rooted and cordial relations between the Iranian and Syrian people, it is expected that the two countries will pursue a wise and far-sighted approach to maintain mutual ties based on

common interests, the statement said.

The statement said Iran reiterates the status of Syria as an "important and influential" country in the West Asia region and will spare no effort to help the country establish security and stability.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran closely monitors developments in Syria and the region and will adopt appropriate approaches and positions while taking into account the behavior and performance of influential players in the Syrian political and security scene," it said.

'A new chapter' in Syria's history

Syria's Foreign Ministry issued its first statement following the collapse of the government, declaring a "new chapter" in the nation's history while urging unity and continued public service.

Syria's Foreign Ministry stated on Sunday that a new page in the country's history has begun.

The ministry emphasized the formation of a "national pact" to unite Syrians during this critical period.

"We must strive to build a nation where justice and equality prevail, and where everyone fulfills their rights and duties," the statement read.

The ministry assured citizens that it, along with its diplomatic missions abroad, remains committed to serving the public and managing their affairs.

"Our continued responsibilities are grounded in the trust placed in us to ensure the supremacy of our homeland," the statement added.

Syrians poured into streets echoing with celebratory gunfire on Sunday after a stunning militant advance reached the capital, putting an end to the Assad family's 53-year rule.

Assad, who had not spoken in public since the sudden militant advance a week ago, flew out of Damascus for an unknown destination earlier on Sunday, two senior army officers told Reuters. His whereabouts now – and those of his wife Asma and their two children – were unknown.

Russia, a close ally, said Assad left the country after negotiations with militant groups and had given instructions to transfer power peacefully.

Transfer of power

The Syrian militant coalition said it was continuing work to complete the transfer of power in the country to a transitional governing body with full executive powers.

Hours after the capture of the capital by militants, Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali in a statement called for free elections.

Jalali also said he had been in contact with leader of militants Abu Mohammed al-Julani to discuss managing the transitional period, marking a notable development in efforts to shape Syria's political future.

Iraq urges respect for 'free will of all Syrians'

Iraq's government spokesman Basim Alawadi in a statement urged respect for the "free will" of all Syrians and the country's territo-

Syrian militants celebrate in the central city of Homs on December 8, 2024, after they entered Syria's third city overnight.
● MUHAMMAD HAJ KADOUR/AFP



rial integrity.

"Iraq reaffirms the necessity of respecting the free will of all Syrians and emphasizes that the security, territorial integrity and independence of Syria are of paramount importance," the statement said.

Turkey, which has been supporting opposition forces since the beginning of war in Syria in 2011, said on Sunday it wants to help "guarantee security" in Syria.

"Turkey is ready to take responsibility for all that is necessary to heal Syria's wounds and guarantee its unity, integrity and security," Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said in a post on X.

"We will intensify our work on this matter with countries in the region and with international actors in the coming days."

Fidan added that he hoped the "millions of Syrians who had to leave their homes will be able to return to their homeland."

He said earlier, after meeting on Saturday with his Russian and Iranian counterparts, that international and regional actors should ensure a smooth transition from the Assad government.

Kurdish separatists

Fidan said Ankara would work to prevent Kurdish separatists from extending their influence in Syria.

Qatar's Foreign Ministry also warned Syria must not be allowed to slide into chaos.

The Persian Gulf emirate said it was "closely monitoring the developments in Syria," and emphasized "the necessity of preserving

national institutions and the unity of the state to prevent it from descending into chaos."

Qatar – which gave early support to the militants following the war in Syria, has remained a fierce critic of the Syrian leader.

"The ministry calls upon all parties to engage in dialogue to safeguard the lives of the citizens," the statement said, voicing Qatar's "unwavering support for the Syrian people and their choices."

The EU's top diplomat Kaja Kallas said the EU's priority is to "ensure security" in the region and pledged to work with "all the constructive partners" in Syria and more broadly across the area. Germany and France also welcomed the fall of Syrian government.

Iran decries attack on embassy after Damascus falls to militants



Iran condemned the attack by militants, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), on its embassy in the Syrian capital Damascus following the fall of the government of Presi-

dent Bashar al-Assad. Videos circulated online Sunday showed the militants tearing down the poster that depicted martyred Iranian anti-terror commander General

Qassem Soleimani and Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, at the diplomatic mission's exterior. They also broke the windows of the embassy and looted its offices, Press TV reported.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei later on Sunday said it is a fundamental principle of international law to protect the security and safety of diplomatic and consular premises and missions under any circumstances.

He added that all neces-

sary strategies have been taken to ensure the security and safety of the staff of the Iranian embassy in Damascus.

The Iranian spokesperson noted that Iran's ambassador to Damascus and the embassy's staff "are in complete health."

"In contact with the influential parties in the developments in Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran has warned about this issue and called for preventing the repetition of such attacks," Baghaei said.

Senior UAE official urges talks with Iran on regional developments

A senior diplomatic advisor to the president of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) called for talks with Iran on regional developments following the fall of Syrian government.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the Manama Security Dialogue in Bahrain on Sunday, Anwar Gargash said Iran is an important party in the region and talks should be held with Tehran over the regional developments, IRNA reported.

He expressed concern over the situation in Syria following the fall of the government of President Bashar al-Assad, saying that the main concern is over terrorism and extremism.

The Emirati official also said that the cur-

rent political vacuum in Syria should not be misused, adding that defense and military issues must not be under control of armed groups.

"We have to wait and see what will happen in Syria," he said, noting that the only way is for a reliable government to take office. The main concern now is the integrity of Syrian territory, which is under threat, Gargash stressed.

He also said that he did not know whether or not Bashar al-Assad was in the UAE.

The Syrian army command announced the fall of the Assad government early on Sunday after armed groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) entered the capital Damascus.



Hamas orders data gathering on captives prior to cease-fire deal

Sources within Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza said Sunday that Hamas had told them to compile information on the hostages they hold in preparation for a cease-fire and hostage-release deal with Israel.

Hamas told factions including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front and the Popular Resistance Committees to prepare information such as whether their captives were alive or dead, the sources told AFP.

During Hamas's surprise October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, the resistance group and its allies took 251 people captive.

A total of 96 remain in Gaza, includ-

ing 34 the Israeli military has confirmed are dead.

A one-week truce in November 2023 saw dozens of captives exchanged for Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, but since then negotiations have failed to make a breakthrough.

Qatar's prime minister said on Saturday there was renewed "momentum" for a cease-fire and hostage release deal following the election of Donald Trump in the United States.

A Hamas source told AFP there had been "intensified contacts" recently between Hamas and Qatari, Egyptian and Turkish mediators, and that the group expected a new round of talks

in Cairo "will begin in the coming days."

The same source called on Israel to halt the war, saying the presence of its forces made it "difficult to reach all the captive groups to know the details of the living and dead prisoners."

The October 7 attack resulted in the deaths of 1,208 people, according to an AFP tally of official Israeli figures, and sparked the war in Gaza.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has also killed 44,708 people in Gaza, the majority civilians, according to figures from the territory's health ministry which the UN considers reliable.



Julani's journey; a story of change and power



International Desk

The Syrian government fell early on Sunday in a shocking end to President Bashar al-Assad's 24-year rule over the Arab nation after the militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized the capital, Damascus.

After a week of rapid offensive, the armed faction, led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, announced on Sunday that they had liberated Damascus and ended the president's reign, facing no resistance from government troops.

Julani became a key figure in Syria's insurgency. Once linked to Al-Qaeda, he is one of the most wanted figures by the US with a \$10 million bounty on his head.

Born Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa in 1982 in Riyadh, where his father was a petroleum engineer, Julani is now Syria's most recognizable rebel leader, having gradually risen to prominence since breaking away from Al-Qaeda in 2013.

He rebranded his group and established himself as the ruler of rebel-held north-western Syria.

Julani's journey began as a prisoner. Arrested by US forces in Iraq in 2006 and held for five years, he was later tasked with establishing Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, Al-Nusra Front, which grew its influence in opposition-held areas, especially Idlib.

His ties with Al-Qaeda and Daesh played a role in his rise. He now leads HTS, which fought against Assad's government.

His transformation from prisoner to rebel leader is significant. The HTS leader's connections with major terrorist groups have been crucial. These ties helped him gain power and influence in Syria. HTS, under Julani, has been a major force in the Syrian civil war. The group aimed to overthrow Assad's government, which led to ongoing conflict and instability in the region.

Julani's story is one of change and pow-

er. From his early days with Al-Qaeda to leading HTS, he remains a key player in Syria's future.

As the founder of HTS, Julani has for nearly a decade sought to dissociate himself from other armed forces and their focus on transnational operations, switching instead to focusing on creating an "Islamic republic" in Syria. Since 2016, he has been positioning himself and his group as credible caretakers of a Syria liberated from Assad, whose government faced a popular uprising during the Arab Spring in 2011, leading to a war that had continued since.

HTS governs Idlib Province through the so-called Syrian Salvation Government, which it established in 2017 to deliver civil services, education, healthcare, a judiciary, and infrastructure, as well as to manage finances and aid distribution. However, according to activists, news reports, and local monitors, HTS rules with an iron fist and

does not tolerate dissent. The independent journalism organization Syria Direct reports that HTS is responsible for the disappearances of activists and has fired live ammunition at protesters who accuse the group of withholding services from communities that oppose it.

For someone who once operated in the shadows, Julani exuded confidence and tried to project modernity in his interview with CNN, which took place in broad daylight and with little security.

Two days before the Assad government's collapse, in his first sit-down media interview in years, at an undisclosed location in Syria, Julani spoke about plans to create a government based on institutions and a "council chosen by the people."

"When we talk about objectives, the goal of the revolution remains the overthrow of this regime. It is our right to use all available means to achieve that goal," said Julani.

Despite Julani's effort to distance his new group from Al-Qaeda, the United States designated HTS a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2018 and placed a \$10 million bounty on him.

However, Julani says he has gone through episodes of transformation through the years. "A person in their twenties will have a different personality than someone in their thirties or forties, and certainly someone in their fifties. This is human nature."

Turkey, the United Nations and several other Western nations also continue to designate HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, despite the group's attempts to distance itself from its roots. Julani pushed back against the enduring terror designation of HTS, calling the label "primarily political and, at the same time, inaccurate," arguing that some extremist practices had "created a divide" between HTS and extremist groups. He said that he was opposed to some of the more brutal tactics used by

other groups which led to his severing ties with them. He also said that he was never personally involved in attacks on civilians.

Julani's interview with CNN on Thursday was an about-face from the hard-line rhetoric that he used during his first-ever televised interview in 2013, when he was interviewed by Al Jazeera with his face in shadow. At the time, his remarks were focused on furthering Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.

On Thursday, Julani projected a different vision for the war-torn country. In a sign of his attempted rebranding, he also publicly used his real name for the first time - Ahmed al-Sharaa - instead of the nom de guerre by which he is widely known.

If opposition forces succeed in toppling Assad's government, it will transition into "a state of governance, institutions and so on," he envisioned.

Syria's opposition forces are decentralized and made up of different ideologies, albeit united by a common goal of upending the Assad government.

The group said it is working to reassure civilians and groups that suffered persecution at the hands of extremist groups in Syria's decade-long civil war. It also said it has gone out of its way to publicly tell Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities that they will live safely under its rule.

"There were some violations against them [minorities] by certain individuals during periods of chaos, but we addressed these issues," Julani said, when asked about concerns for their safety.

"No one has the right to erase another group. These sects have coexisted in this region for hundreds of years, and no one has the right to eliminate them," he said.

"We are talking about a larger project - we are talking about building Syria," Julani continued. "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is merely one part of this dialogue, and it may dissolve at any time."



Iran will not...

However, the demise of Daesh did not bring an end to the conflict. Other opposition groups,

such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), continued their resistance against the Syrian government, maintaining a foothold in certain regions. After Daesh's decline, these groups, bolstered by the support of the Zionist regime and other entities seeking Assad's downfall, regained their military capabilities and resumed their operations. Regrettably, the Syrian army underestimated these threats, and when the opposition forces launched their offensive, the military was unable to mount a strong de-

fense. Within a fortnight, the opposition achieved its objectives, capitalizing on the army's unpreparedness.

What is evident is that no government can sustain its position indefinitely through external support alone. The preservation of sovereignty hinges primarily on the internal strength and loyalty of the government and its military personnel, which was notably lacking during the recent crisis in Syria.

As we have observed, the absence of internal resolve to resist adversaries leaves no alternative but capitulation. The recent developments in Syria have inflicted significant damage to the

country's infrastructure, thereby weakening its overall stability. Syria has endured severe economic and military setbacks, and its people have grappled with economic hardships and poverty. These compounded challenges led to the Syrian army's rapid disintegration in the face of opposition forces, preventing it from mounting a robust defense. Moreover, the opposition, being fellow Syrians and refraining from mass killings unlike Daesh, was more readily accepted by the people, leading to the army's surrender. Despite these interpretations, given Syria's alignment with the axis of resistance, Iran will certainly not leave the

Syrian people alone. Neighboring countries like Turkey, Russia, Iraq, and Jordan will also not remain indifferent to Syria's issues and must take action to prevent external domination with malicious intent.

Syria has long been a staunch ally of Iran, with its people supporting the Iranian system and nation. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Syria stood by Iran against Saddam Hussein's regime. Consequently, Iran will not withdraw its support from Syria and its people. In the current situation, Iranian officials must implement measures to prevent Syria from falling into foreign hands, as the security of

Syria directly impacts Iran and the broader region.

As we have witnessed, Iran has not been passive in the face of developments in Syria. The recent activities of our foreign minister, who has traveled to Turkey, Russia, and several Arab countries to facilitate a resolution, demonstrate Iran's active role. Extensive negotiations have been conducted, including a recent meeting in Qatar involving foreign ministers from eight countries and some Syrian opposition figures, where discussions focused on the Syrian crisis.

With the Assad government having stepped down and new conditions prevailing in the

country, Iran will closely monitor Syrian issues and make informed decisions. Iranian officials and policymakers, known for their strategic acumen, can navigate these developments to steer the country and regional issues in the right direction. Similar challenges, such as the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, have been managed through wise policies and appropriate measures. In the matter of Syria and recent developments, we are confident that Iran will not be left behind and will guide the situation in favor of our country, the Syrian people, and the region.