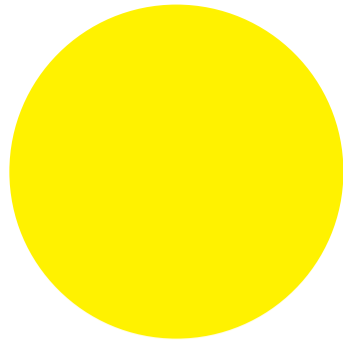




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# Iran, India discuss Chabahar Port development

Iran and India exchanged their views on the joint development of the Chabahar Port and enhancing trade and economic ties as they discussed potential cooperation in agriculture and other sectors.

The 19th India-Iran Foreign Office Consultations took place in Delhi where Iran urged India to consider resuming Iranian crude oil imports after the latter halted the imports in mid-2019 due to US sanctions on Tehran.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi said on Friday that the relations between Iran and India are traditional and historical.

"This afternoon in New Delhi, I participated in the 19th Iran-India Political Consultations. We discussed bilateral, regional and international issues with Mr. [Shri Vikram] Misri, the Foreign Secretary of India," Takht-Ravanchi wrote on a social media platform on Friday.

"Economic relations, including Chabahar Port, were prominent in the negotiations," he stated. The senior diplomat said he also had a useful meeting with India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar. "Iran-India relations are traditional and historical. They (Iran and India) are determined to promote relations in various fields," he added.

Iran and India have a long-standing historical relationship and cultural and economic ties.

India agreed in 2016 to finance the development of the Iranian port but the process was stalled two years later due to the US sanctions reimposed after Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

Iran and India signed a deal in May last year under which the India Ports Global (IPGL) company is allowed to develop and control Chabahar for 10 years.

Chabahar, located on Iran's coast

along the Sea of Oman, is the country's only ocean port.

It is regarded as a major trade link between the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan and landlocked countries in the Central Asia region.

India seeks to develop Chabahar as a rival to the Chinese-funded Pakistani Gwadar and Karachi ports.

India obtained a US sanctions waiver in 2018 to be able to work in Chabahar.

At the meeting, the two sides also reiterated their commitment to deepening collaboration in multilateral forums like the United Nations, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Although BBICS initially included only its founding members, it now comprises Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates.

According to a statement by the Indian Foreign Ministry, the



IRNA

recent discussions have set a positive tone for future collaborations between India and Iran. Both nations are keen on exploring new avenues for cooperation while addressing regional challenges together.

Meanwhile, India and Iran are part of a trilateral alliance, along with Armenia, with a focus on

regional cooperation, connectivity, and trade. The second India-Iran-Armenia Trilateral Consultations, held in New Delhi on December 12, 2024, saw the three sides emphasizing the strategic importance of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port as crucial connectivity

hubs.

The INSTC is a multi-modal trade route that connects South Asia with Europe through Iran and the Caucasus. During the talks in New Delhi, all three nations reiterated their commitment to enhancing the functionality of the corridor, with Iran's Chabahar Port playing a central role.

## Minister highlights goal of 10m-ton goods transit via INSTC



IRNA

Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Farzaneh Sadeq-Malvajerd emphasized achieving the goal of transiting 10 million tons of goods through the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) in an online meeting with her Russian counterpart Roman Vladimirovich Starovoyt.

Sadeq-Malvajerd highlighted the corridor's ca-

capacity to handle 20 million tons of transit across rail, road, and maritime routes, which must be fully utilized, IRNA reported.

During Saturday's video conference, the Iranian minister expressed satisfaction with the regular discussions on the construction of the Rasht-Ashtara railway involving representatives from both countries.

She referred to a draft memorandum of cooperation and a roadmap for 2025, which were presented to the Russian side, proposing that both documents be signed simultaneously on an agreed date.

The minister underlined the importance of enhancing transport collaboration within the INSTC framework, noting that based on previous agreements between the two nations, the goal of 10 million tons of transit should be achieved. Sadeq-Malvajerd also advocated for prompt ac-

tions to operationalize the corridor's eastern branch, the establishment of a trilateral transportation and customs committee among Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan, the facilitation of visa issuance for Iranian drivers, expanding commercial shipping capacity, and developing passenger routes in the Caspian Sea.

She called the development of a comprehensive transportation roadmap between Iran and Russia a significant achievement under consideration by both countries' ministries.

Extending New Year greetings to the Russian government and people, Sadeq-Malvajerd expressed hope for a year marked by peace and strengthened bilateral relations.

In response, Russian minister thanked his Iranian counterpart for the productive meetings and expressed agreement with all proposals made during the session.

### 16.5m-ton transit in nine months

Meanwhile, the head of Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration announced on the same day that foreign transit through the country increased by 31% over the first nine months of the current Iranian year (started March 20, 2024), reaching 16.5 million tons.

Foroud Asgari said that Shahid Rajaei, Parviz Khan, and Bashmaq customs terminals were the top transit hubs, collectively accounting for the highest volume of transited goods during the nine-month period.

According to Asgari, 4.4 million tons of goods were transited from Shahid Rajaei Special Economic Zone, 3.8 million tons from Parviz Khan Customs, and 2.3 million tons from Bashmaq Customs.

In total, 10.5 million tons of foreign transit during this period originated from these three major customs points.

## NDF set to play greater role in boosting oil production

The head of the National Development Fund (NDF)'s executive board said that the Economic Council of Iran has approved a plan to increase daily oil production by 250,000 barrels, as the fund is participating in its financing.

In a press conference on Saturday marking the 14th anniversary of the NDF's establishment, Mehdi Ghazanfari stated that in the past, the fund had less involvement in sectors like oil and gas, artificial intelligence, and renewable energy, Shana reported.

However, the NDF currently has a dedicated department for these areas, he said, noting that in projects such as oil and gas or water supply for the Central Plateau of Iran, the fund's goal is to expand its share without engaging in direct operations.

Referring to the current electricity shortages, the official noted that the fund has been working with banks to support power generation projects.

Ghazanfari emphasized that increasing oil production by 250,000 barrels per day requires an investment of \$3 billion, noting that the fund is set to provide this amount for the National Iranian Oil Company, although no funds have been transferred to the company yet.

He further explained that, based on



SHANA

cash flow analysis, the fund should receive annual oil revenues. However, in the past three years, no new oil revenues have been deposited into the fund.

Since its establishment, the NDF has received \$163.67 billion from oil, gas, and gas condensate exports, the official stated.

**\$23b for 60 energy projects**  
Alireza Mirmohammad-Sadeqi, a

member of the NDF's executive board, also presented a report on the fund's energy sector performance.

He said the fund has financed 60 oil and gas projects totaling \$23 billion over the past 14 years, along with 48 power plant projects worth \$4.8 billion to generate 7,000 megawatts.

Additionally, the fund has supported seven transportation projects

worth \$2.7 billion and one water supply project valued at \$600 million. It has also provided \$4 billion in loans to 21 small-scale projects. He added that \$26 billion worth of oil and gas projects are currently being studied by the fund.

The work on financing the \$3 billion project to boost oil production by 250,000 barrels per day is nearly finalized, and \$750 million will be paid by the end of this year (March 20).



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# Rasht; a culinary capital in UNESCO Creative Cities Network

↑ Baqala Qatoq

## Iranica Desk

Rasht, celebrated for the unique aromas of local dishes crafted by the grandmothers of Gilan Province, a member of the Creative Cities of Gastronomy network in 2015. It joins notable cities such as Adelaide, Australia; Barcelona, Spain; Bergen, Norway; Budapest, Hungary; Detroit, USA; Liverpool, UK; Rome, Italy; Montevideo, Uruguay; Salvador, Brazil; Singapore, and 22 other cities across 46 countries worldwide.

Marjan Nemati Sabaa, a journalist, highlighted that tourism is one of the most significant strategies for various nations pursuing sustainable development. Consequently, a heightened focus on different forms of tourism can have a substantial impact on the economy. From historical and cultural perspectives, Iran stands out as an essential tourist destination in the region. Culinary tourism, in particular, emphasizes food as a primary motivation for travel, chntn. ir wrote.

Culinary tourism can be viewed as a journey to a destination that offers rich cultural experiences, unique meals, and

local flavors. Food plays a crucial role in tourists' decision-making processes when selecting travel destinations. The diverse local dishes of Gilan Province significantly contribute to its reputation as a flagship of Iran's food industry within the tourism sector.

Few can mention Rasht without conjuring memories of its delicious dishes and enticing aromas. The fame of these culinary delights is recognized not just in Iran but also across the globe. When Gilan Province and Rasht are discussed, the distinctive flavors and aromas of their local cuisine shine forth alongside their rich history, vibrant traditions, and warm hospitality. This reflects the ingenuity of the region's inhabitants and their artistry in creating a wide variety of dishes from a limited range of natural ingredients.

The kitchens of Gilan Province are filled with the enticing scents of local foods, prompting foreign tourists to inquire about traditional dishes upon their arrival. UNESCO, as an educational, scientific, and cultural organization, established the Creative Cities Network in 2004 to



↑ Anar Bij

prioritize creativity and cultural industries at the core of local development and international collaboration.

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) encompasses seven creative fields: handicrafts, folk arts, media arts, film, design, gastronomy, literature, and music. Its mission is to strengthen creativity and promote the production, distribution, and enjoyment of cultural products and services at the local level.

This initiative also seeks to foster creative expression — particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and youth — while increasing access to and participation in cultural life, as well as maximizing the benefits

derived from cultural products. The integration of cultural and creative industries has long been one of the major attractions for travelers visiting Gilan Province, which is renowned for its rich

and vibrant culinary landscape. Thus, defining food destinations can provide a fresh perspective on culinary tourism.

According to this understanding, food routes not only help preserve local

dishes but also aid in reviving forgotten or nearly forgotten culinary traditions.

With Rasht designated as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, the province has emerged as a promi-

nent destination for food tourism. Consequently, food routes can orient the travels of this type of cultural tourist. Approximately 300 local dishes have been identified in the province, with 30 dishes officially registered on the national list and 20 more currently undergoing the registration process.

The global recognition of Rasht as a Creative City of Gastronomy, combined with innovative concepts such as defining food routes in Gilan Province, aims not only to spread the aromas of Gilan's grandmothers' dishes around the world but also to preserve the authenticity and cultural richness of this land, ensuring it flourishes more than ever.



↑ Vavishka



↑ Mirza Qasemi

## Recognizing Fooladshahr's contribution to modern heritage



## Iranica Desk

Fooladshahr, as a successful example of contemporary urban planning in Iran, holds narratives of the country's historical architectural heritage in a new form that must be conveyed to today's generation, said Ahmad Fathi, head of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department of Lenjan.

Fooladshahr is one of Iran's modern and new cities located on the outskirts of the city of Isfahan, near the Esfahan Steel Company. Efforts have been made to intro-



duce it as a part of Iran's and Isfahan's modern heritage at International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement (Docomo-

mo), IRNA wrote. Fathi added that Fooladshahr is one of the prominent examples of contemporary architectural and urban heritage in Iran, reflecting the continuity of

our nation's past architecture intertwined with the modern era. Therefore, the need to recognize it for today's generation is felt more strongly than ever. He emphasized that the

mosques, streets, neighborhoods, houses, and kindergartens of this city each tell a part of the identity of Iran's historical architecture in a new form, and understanding this serves as a foundation for identity formation and enhancing the sense of belonging among citizens and audiences.

Fathi added, "Jaame Mosque of Fooladshahr, due to its contemporary architectural features, is one of the buildings for which we are preparing a national dossier, so that after review and approval, it can be listed among the national heritage

sites of Iran."

He noted that experts from Docomomo visited Fooladshahr in recent years and deemed this city valuable and capable of being included in the list of "Cities with Modern Architecture in the World," which requires proper documentation to achieve.

Fathi stated that the Lenjan Cultural Heritage Department, in collaboration with the municipality, the Islamic Council of Fooladshahr, the Esfahan Steel Company, the University of Art Isfahan, and the Fooladshahr Civil Development Company, aims to introduce the potential of this contemporary heritage through a series of meetings.

He mentioned that the first session of meeting will be held on January 10, and experts at this meeting will discuss the significance of the architectural and urban planning values of Fooladshahr. In conjunction with this, an exhibition of archival photographs related to the formation of the initial core of Fooladshahr by the Esfahan Steel Company will be presented for the audience. Fathi added that when talking about cultural heri-

tage, people often envision buildings constructed with traditional materials and methods, typically over a century old, while those built with steel and concrete frames do not usually fall into this category in the public's perception.

He emphasized that the historical and cultural values of these modern buildings in Iran have received less attention so far, even though some of these works are considered great achievements in architecture and urban planning. International organizations like Docomomo have been established to identify and promote these works.

The urban planning and architecture of Fooladshahr were carried out by Iranian and European engineers since the 1960s, with local access, green spaces, and the design of residential buildings based on modern architectural standards. Experts state that the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the residents provide a suitable opportunity for developing cultural tourism in this region, which is why Fooladshahr is also referred to as the "Rainbow of Ethnicities."

# Muslim Brotherhood, necessity of recalibrating its compass

By **Mohammad Ali Senobari**  
Director of New Vision

**OPINION**  
**EXCLUSIVE**

*The Muslim Brotherhood, a movement with deep historical roots and ideological ambitions, has become a controversial entity in West Asia's geopolitical landscape. While its rhetoric often emphasizes resistance to imperialism and the liberation of Palestine, its actions, whether intentional or not, frequently align with the strategic objectives of the Zionist regime. This paradox has raised serious questions about the Brotherhood's role, intentions, and internal contradictions.*

## Impact of Muslim Brotherhood on regional stability

A clear example of this phenomenon can be observed in Turkey's policies under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which operates within a framework heavily influenced by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict, under the guise of supporting democracy and protecting human rights, has ultimately weakened Syria — a country historically regarded as a stronghold of resistance against the Zionist regime. The Zionist entity directly benefited from the disintegration of Syrian state structures and the paralysis of its military capabilities, eliminating a major adversary on its borders. Enemy aircraft conducted hundreds of strikes on Syria's strategic military stockpiles to neutralize any future threats — all while Turkey and Syria's new rulers watched.

The parallels between Turkey's maneuvers in Syria and the emerging strategies of the Brotherhood in Egypt are striking. In both cases, the rhetoric of reform and liberation masked policies leading to fragmentation and instability. If this trajectory continues, Egypt, like Syria, risks becoming a theater of chaos, internal conflict, and the erosion of its military capabilities — a scenario that troublingly aligns with the long-term goals of the Zionist regime.

## Zionist strategy of regional fragmentation

The Zionist entity has long pursued a strategy of regional fragmentation to secure its dominance. By systematically weakening neighboring states, often referred to as the "ring



Local commanders and members of one of Aleppo's most important rebel units, the Liwa al-Tawhid brigade, regarded as the "armed wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," gather for a daily meeting in their headquarters in Izaa neighborhood of Aleppo on September 25, 2012.

● MIGUEL MEDINA/AFP

states," it ensures the absence of any credible military threats. This strategy began with Syria, a state whose strong military once posed a significant challenge to Israeli ambitions. The collapse of Syria's military capabilities due to prolonged conflict has been a major victory for the Zionist regime.

Egypt now stands as the next critical target. With its rich history, strategic location, and one of the strongest armies in the Arab world, Egypt's stability is of paramount importance. However, the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood threaten to undermine this stability. If Egypt's military and governmental structures falter, the Zionist regime will find itself even more secure from potential

threats. On the heels of Egypt, Jordan and Iraq appear to be the next candidates for destabilization. Jordan's strategic location and Iraq's vast resources make them primary targets. The Zionist regime's blueprint for the region is clear: dismantling the armies and governmental structures of neighboring states to ensure unchallenged dominance. The actions of the Muslim Brotherhood, whether driven by ideological misguidance, external manipulation, or internal failures, inadvertently align with this blueprint.

## Internal crisis of Muslim Brotherhood

To understand this trajectory, it is necessary to scrutinize the

internal dynamics of the Muslim Brotherhood. Once a movement focused on the liberation of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the restoration of Islamic dignity, it is now plagued by strategic drift and ideological contradictions. The disconnect between its founding principles and the actions of its current leadership is stark. While grassroots members of the Brotherhood may remain committed to the cause of liberation, the leadership has often adopted policies that contradict this goal.

This internal crisis is exacerbated by the presence of compromised or infiltrated leaders within the Brotherhood. These individuals, whether influenced by external forces or driven by personal am-

bitions, have successfully steered the movement away from its original course. Their decisions have not only undermined the Brotherhood's credibility but also made it vulnerable to manipulation by external powers, including the Zionist regime and its allies.

## Strategic deception, future

The Muslim Brotherhood's failure to recognize and confront the strategic deception it faces has been a catastrophic misstep. The rhetoric of democracy and reform has been weaponized against it, creating divisions and fostering alliances that serve external agendas. The Brotherhood's leadership must confront the uncomfortable reality that



For the original members of the Muslim Brotherhood, those who genuinely aspire to liberate Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and resist occupation, this is a critical moment of reckoning. They must rise above complacency and inaction, challenging the strategic errors of their leadership. Failure to do so will not only erode their credibility but also implicate them in advancing the Zionist agenda.



The photo shows the mass trial of prominent members and affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood including 739 people, charged after the violent dispersal of a protest camp in support of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, in Cairo in September 2018.

● MOHAMED EL-SHAHED/AFP



A drone view shows damage at Latakia port after the Israeli military said it struck Syrian defense facilities, Syria, on December 11, 2024.

● SALAAH JEAAR/REUTERS.

its actions, in many cases, have undermined the very objectives it claims to champion.

For the original members of the Muslim Brotherhood, those who genuinely aspire to liberate Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and resist occupation, this is a critical moment of reckoning. They must rise above complacency and inaction, challenging the strategic errors of their leadership. Failure to do so will not only erode their credibility but also implicate them in

advancing the Zionist agenda. The trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood has profound implications for the broader West Asia. By weakening key states like Syria and Egypt, the Brotherhood has inadvertently contributed to creating a regional landscape characterized by fragmentation and conflict. This environment not only benefits the Zionist regime but also perpetuates cycles of instability that undermine the region's ability to

resist external domination. The liberation of Al-Quds (Jerusalem), a cause that resonates deeply throughout the Islamic world, cannot be achieved through alliances and policies that weaken the foundational structures of the region. The Muslim Brotherhood must recognize that its current path is unsustainable. A return to its original principles, coupled with strategic recalibration, is imperative. The Muslim Brotherhood stands

at a crossroads. It can either continue on its current path, marked by strategic missteps and ideological drift, or embark on a profound process of introspection and reform. This process must begin with an honest assessment of its role in either advancing or hindering the cause of resistance. The genuine members of the Muslim Brotherhood must reclaim the movement's original vision and unite against their leadership's complicity in adopting

policies that serve external agendas. They must prioritize the liberation of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) not merely as a rhetorical goal but as a tangible objective that requires strategic clarity and unity. The stakes have never been higher. The Zionist regime's ambitions extend beyond Palestine to encompass the fragmentation and subjugation of the entire region. The actions of the Muslim Brotherhood, whether intentional or unintentional, have so

far played a role in advancing this agenda. Now is the time for decisive action. Failure to act will not only tarnish the legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood but also accelerate the realization of the Zionist regime's expansionist goals. The future demands courage, clarity, and steadfast commitment to the principles of justice and resistance. For the Muslim Brotherhood and the region as a whole, the choice is clear: recalibration or collapse.

## How to understand change of gov't in Syria

By Vijay Prashad  
Historian, journalist  
**OPINION**

One of the most stunning events of the past few months has been the fall of Damascus. This fall had initially been expected over a decade ago when rebel armies funded by Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States crowded around the edges of Syria and threatened then-president

Bashar al-Assad's government. These armies, backed by rich and powerful countries, were comprised of a range of actors, including:

1. swaths of people who were angered by the economic distress caused by the opening up of the economy and the subsequent devastation of small manufacturing businesses, which were suffering in the face of the emerging might of Turkish manufacturing;
2. the peasantry in the north, frustrated by the government's lack of a proper response to the long drought that forced them into the northern cities of Aleppo and Idlib;
3. sectors of the secular petty bourgeoisie discontent with the failure of the Damascus Spring of 2000–01, which had initially promised political reforms stemming from the *muntadayāt* (forum discussions) held across the country;
4. a deeply aggrieved Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, formed out of the pious petty bourgeoisie, which had been crushed in 1982 and re-emerged after being inspired by the role the Brotherhood played in the 2010–11 protests in Tunisia and Egypt;
5. eager Islamist forces that had been trained by Al-Qaeda in Iraq and wanted to fly the black flag of jihadism from the highest parapets in Damascus.

Despite the failure of these factions of the Syrian opposition in 2011, it was many of these same forces that succeeded in overthrowing Assad's government on December 7, 2024.



From right to left, the illustration portrays Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Just over a decade ago, Assad's government remained in power largely because of support from Iran and Russia, but also because of the involvement — to a lesser extent — of neighbouring Iraq and Hezbollah (Lebanon). Assad did not have the stomach for the contest. He became president in 2000 after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who took office through a military coup in 1971. Bashar al-Assad had a privileged upbringing and studied to be an ophthalmologist in the United Kingdom. When the rebel armies neared Damascus in December of this year, Assad fled to Moscow with his family, claiming that he wanted to retire from politics and resume his career as an ophthalmologist. He did not make a statement to his people telling them to be brave or that his forces would fight another day. There were no comforting words. He left quietly in the same way he appeared, his country abandoned. A few days later, on Telegram, al-Assad released a text but was timid.

After being defeated by Syrian, Iranian, and Russian forces in 2014, the Syrian rebels regrouped in the city of Idlib, not far from Turkey's border with Syria. That is where the main opposition force broke with Al-Qaeda in 2016, took over the local councils, and shaped itself as the only leader of the anti-Assad campaign. This group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant, or HTS), is now in charge in Damascus.

Originating directly from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, HTS has not been able to shed those roots and remains a deeply sectarian body with ambitions to eventually turn Syria into a caliphate. Since his time in Iraq and northern Syria, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani developed a reputation

of great brutality toward a large number of minority groups in Syria (specifically Alawites, Armenians, Kurds, and Shias), who he regarded as apostates. Al-Jolani is well aware of his reputation, but he has remarkably altered the way he presents himself. He has shed the trappings of his Al-Qaeda days, trimmed his beard, been dressing in a nondescript khaki uniform — and now a suit and a tie — and learned to talk to the media in measured tones. In an exclusive interview with CNN released just as his forces took Damascus, al-Jolani recalled past murderous acts committed in his name merely as youthful indiscretions. It was as if he had been trained by a public relations company. No longer the Al-Qaeda madman, al-Jolani is now being presented as a Syrian democrat. On December 12, I spoke to two friends from minority communities in different parts of Syria. Both said that they fear for their lives. They understand that though there will be a period of jubilation and calm, they will eventually face severe attacks and have already begun hearing reports of small-scale attacks against Alawites and Shia families in their network. Another friend reminded me that there was calm in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003; several weeks later, the insurgency began. Could such an insurgency of former government forces take place in Syria after they have recomposed from their state's hasty fall? It is impossible to know what the social fabric of the new Syria will be like given the character of the people who have taken power. This will be especially true if even a fraction of those seven million Syrians who were displaced during the war return home and seek revenge for

what they will surely see as the mistreatment that forced them overseas. No war of this kind ends with peace. There are many scores yet to settle.

Without detracting attention from the Syrian people and their well-being, we must also understand what this change of government means for the region and the world. Let us take the implications sequentially, starting with the Sahel region in Africa.

1. Israel. Taking advantage of the decade-long war in Syria, Israel has bombed Syrian military bases on a regular basis to degrade both the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies (notably, Iran and Hezbollah). Over the past year, during its escalation of the genocide against Palestinians, Israel has also increased its bombing of any military facility it believes is being used to resupply Iran and Hezbollah. Israel then invaded Lebanon to weaken Hezbollah by assassinating Hezbollah's long-time leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, and by invading southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah was rooted. As if coordinated, Israel provided air support to HTS as it moved out of Idlib, bombing Syrian military facilities and army posts to demoralise the SAA. When HTS took Damascus, Israel strengthened its Division 210 in the Occupied Golan Heights (seized in 1973) and then invaded the United Nations buffer zone (set up in 1974). Israeli tanks proceeded outside the buffer zone and came very close to Damascus. HTS did not contest this occupation of Syria at any point.

2. Turkey. The Turkish government provided military and political support to the 2011 rebellion from its inception and hosted the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood government in Istanbul. In 2020, when the

SAA moved against the rebels in Idlib, Turkey invaded Syria to force an agreement that the city would not be harmed. Turkey also enabled the military training of most of the fighters who proceeded down highway M5 to Damascus and provided military equipment to the armies to battle the Kurds in the north and the SAA in the south. It was through Turkey that various Central Asian Islamists joined the HTS fight, including Uyghurs from China. When Turkey invaded Syria twice over the past decade, it held Syrian territory that it claimed was its historical land. This territory will not return to Syria under the HTS government. 3. Lebanon and Iraq. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, Iran built a land bridge to supply its allies in both Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Syria. With the change of government in Syria, resupplying Hezbollah will become difficult. Both Lebanon and Iraq will now border a country ruled by a former Al-Qaeda affiliate. While it is not immediately clear what this means for the region, it is likely that there will be an emboldened Al-Qaeda presence that wants to undermine the role of the Shia in these countries.

4. Palestine. The implications for the genocide in Palestine and for the struggle for Palestinian liberation are extraordinary. Given Israel's role in undermining Assad's military on behalf of HTS, it is unlikely that al-Jolani will contest Israel's occupation of Palestine or allow Iran to resupply Hezbollah or Hamas. Despite his name, which comes from the Golan, it is inconceivable that al-Jolani will fight to regain the Golan Heights for Syria. Israel's 'buffers' in Lebanon and Syria add to the regional complacency with its actions achieved by

events such as its peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). No neighbour of Israel will pose a threat to it at this time. The Palestinian struggle is already experiencing great isolation from these developments. Resistance will continue, but there will be no neighbour to provide access to the means for resistance.

5. The Sahel. Since the United States and Israel are basically one country when it comes to geopolitics, Israel's victory is a victory for the United States. The change of government in Syria has not only weakened Iran in the short term but has also weakened Russia (a long-term strategic goal of the United States), which previously used Syrian airports to refuel its supply planes en route to various African countries. It is no longer possible for Russia to use these bases, and it remains unclear where Russian military aircraft will be able to refuel for journeys into the region, notably to countries in the Sahel. This will provide the United States with an opportunity to push the countries that border the Sahel, such as Nigeria and Benin, to launch operations against the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. This will require a close watch.

In July 1958, several poets organised a festival in Akka (occupied Palestine '48). One of the participating poets, David Semah, wrote 'Akhi Tawfiq' (My Brother Tawfiq), dedicated to the Palestinian communist poet Tawfiq Zayyad who was in an Israeli prison at the time of the festival. Semah's poem grounds us in the sensibility that is so sorely needed in our times: *If they sow skulls in its dirt Our harvest will be hope and light.*

The article first appeared on *Tricontinental*.

# Freestyle Wrestling National Championships: Contenders emerge for place in Iranian squad

## Sports Desk

The opening phase of the Iranian trials for the World Championships came to an end with the conclusion of the Freestyle Wrestling National Championships on Friday, where 10 wrestlers made their case for a place in the September event in Zagreb, Croatia.

Former world junior and under-23 bronze medalist Ahmad Mohammadnejad Javan will be looking to go all they way to punch his ticket for the Croatian capital after walking away with the ultimate prize in the 61kg contests, thanks to a 4-2 victory over Ali Qolizadegan in the final. Ebrahim Elahi, a world under-17 gold medalist in 2022, was in a 70kg league of his own, conceding a single point in five bouts en route to the final before a 6-1 win against Ali-Akbar Fazli for the top spot.

Fariborz Babaei stole the show in the 79kg event, defeating former world junior champion Erfan Elahi 3-2 in the final showpiece.

Mohammad-Mobin Azimi, a world U23 gold medalist in 2023, introduced himself as a top contender for the national



team berth following his technical-superiority win against Fazel Pour-Rajab the 92kg showdown. The 125kg final saw Mahdi Hashemi beat Morteza Jan-Mohammadzadeh 6-2 for the national

gold, though it is hard to imagine anyone other than two-time world champion and Olympic silver winner Amirhossein Zare' as the Iranian super-heavyweight in Zagreb.

Friday's results came after Mojtaba Goleij had showcased his credentials for a shot at world 97kg glory on the preceding night in Gorgan. A world bronze winner in 2021,

Goleij defeated reigning Asian under-20 champion Abolfazl Babalou 6-0 in the final to throw down the gauntlet to Olympic bronze medalist Amirali Azarpira and two-time

Ebrahim Elahi (blue) is in action against Ali-Akbar Fazli in the 70kg final at the Freestyle Wrestling National Championships in Gorgan, Iran, on January 3, 2025. **FARSHAD BANDANI/IAWF**

world 92kg champion Kamran Qasempour, who is keen on competing in an Olympic weight class ahead of the Los Angeles Games in three years' time. Hadi Rezaei looked to be the favorite for the 57kg title after a massive 7-3 victory over former world silver medalist Alireza Sarlak in the semifinals, but ultimately suffered a 7-1 loss to 20-year-old Milad Valizadeh in the final. Yassin Rezaei capped off his dominant 65kg campaign with a 13-2 win against Dariush Hazratqolizadeh in the final – a fifth victory by technical superiority for the 2023 Asian bronze winner in as many bouts. Hossein Abouzari finished atop the podium in the 74kg class, courtesy of a 7-2 win against Hossein Mohammad-Aqaei, while the 86kg showdown saw Omidreza Soheili come out victorious (10-2) in emphatic fashion against Mohammad-Hossein Norouzi.

# Esteghlal considering a move for ex-Brighton winger Tau

## Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal is reportedly weighing up a move for South African winger Percy Tau, with head coach Pitso Mosimane keen on reuniting with his compatriot in the Iranian top flight. A former player of Brighton & Hove Albion and Belgian Pro League champion in 2020 with Club Brugge, Tau, 30, left the Premier League club in 2021 to join Egyptian giant Al Ahly, where he won 11 major trophies, including back-to-back CAF Champions League titles over the past two seasons. Having made his senior club debut at Mamelodi Sundowns in his home country under Mosimane, Tau won double South African league titles as well as the silverware in the African elite clubs' competition in 2016 before leaving the continent for the English top flight.

His time in Brighton was hardly deemed a success as he only made three league appearances for the Seagulls, but still enjoyed prolific loan spells with Union SG, Club Brugge, RSC Anderlecht, bagging 21 goals and 22 assists in 79 games with the Belgian clubs.

On his return to African football, Tae rejoined Mosimane in Al Ahly, contributing with 30 goals and 14 assists in 126 outings for the Egyptian Red Devils – including three Champions League strikes this season.

Tehran-based website Varzesh3, citing a report in korabia.net, wrote on Friday that Mosimane has made contact with his former club Al Ahly in recent days to find out about Tau's situation ahead of an official approach by the Tehran Blues. Capped 46 times for the national team since making his debut in

2015, Tau has 15 goals under his belt in the Bafana Bafana colors, finishing third in the Africa Cup of Nations last January, thanks to a shootout victory over DR Congo in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

A disappointing campaign has seen Esteghlal sit 10th in the Iranian league's 16-team table with 18 points – 14 adrift of Tractor on top – and Mosimane, who took over from ex-coach Javad Nekounam in October, will be eager to turn the Blues' fortune around after the mid-season break.

Mosimane's side is eighth – the last knockout spot – in the West Zone standings of the AFC Champions League Elite with five points and remains in contention for a place in the quarterfinals ahead of the final two games of the group phase against Al Shorta and Al Rayyan in February.



WEAM MOSTAFA/BACKPAGEIX

# No hugs or kisses from Conceicao for Milan players despite Juve win

**REUTERS** – AC Milan manager Sergio Conceicao celebrated an Italian Super Cup semi-final success over Juventus in his first game in charge on Friday, but the new boss said he is not there to make friends. Milan went in at the break a goal down, and it took a stern halftime talking-to from Conceicao to spark them into action, and their 2-1 victory set up a derby decider with Inter Milan on Monday. "After the first 45 minutes, in the locker room I didn't give kisses, in fact I got a little angry because the team didn't do the things we had

prepared," Conceicao told Mediaset. "This is a humble group, sometimes they lack a bit of ruthlessness to get to something more but over time we will get there." Conceicao replaced the sacked Paulo Fonseca on Monday, with Milan eighth in the Serie A standings, and the new manager gave a hint of what the players can expect as he aims to turn things around at the club. "I'm not a very nice person, I don't like to give hugs to players, I'm more often angry but a group needs all this," Conceicao said.

"Ours is a quality group, I am very happy with them because they have also accepted a coach who does not smile so much. "I'm not here to make friends, but to win." Conceicao saved his hugs for his son Francisco at the final whistle, after the Juventus winger had been named in the starting side but was forced to withdraw after picking up an injury in the warm-up. "It was the end of a game, I was happier because I won the game and he was sadder but it's part of life," Conceicao said.



# Araghchi: Iran ready for constructive nuclear talks without delay

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said that the Islamic Republic is ready for constructive negotiations to reach an agreement regarding its nuclear program. Araghchi expressed Tehran's readiness for renewed talks during an exclusive interview with China's CCTV on Friday, Press TV reported. Araghchi said negotiations should be aimed "at reaching an agreement." "We are ready to enter into constructive negotiations without delay," he stated. "The formula we have is the same as the previous JCPOA formula, which is building trust about Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the removal of sanctions. We are ready to negotiate on this basis," he added. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is the agreement signed in July 2015 between Iran, the European Union and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, known as the P5+1. Britain, France, and Germany are set to begin a new round of talks with Iran over its nuclear program in Geneva on January 13. "For more than 2 years, we negotiated with the 5+1 countries in good faith and finally we managed to reach an agreement that the whole world

accepted and admired as an achievement of diplomacy," he stated. Araghchi said that Iran implemented the nuclear deal with good intentions, but it was the United States that decided to pull out from it without any reason or justification. "The US withdrawal from the JCPOA was a very big strategic mistake and was met with a reaction from Iran. Then the US expanded its sanctions," he stated. He said that one round of negotiations has been held with European countries and the second round of these negotiations will be held with three European countries within the next two weeks. In addition, Araghchi said that when the upcoming Trump administration formulates its own policy, "we will make a decision based on it." Iran and Europeans have been conducting on-again, off-again talks since 2018, when the United States illegally and unilaterally left a historic nuclear accord between Iran and world powers under its former president Donald Trump, returning Washington's unlawful sanctions against the Islamic Republic. The trio then failed to live up to their promise of bringing Washington back into the deal. Reacting to the counter-party's non-commitment to its obliga-

The photo grabbed from a video shows Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi speaking during an interview with China's CCTV.



tions, Tehran initiated a set of retaliatory nuclear steps, including by activating more advanced centrifuges. The country has been stepping up the measures in response to the other parties' continued refusal to uphold their obligations. Earlier this year, the European

states forwarded an anti-Iranian resolution proposed by the US to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was approved by the board. Elsewhere in his interview, the Iranian foreign minister also said, "The future of the resistance is bright and Hezbollah

is systematically rebuilding itself." "Iran will support any agreement that Hamas and the Palestinians reach on their own," he noted. About the fluid situation in Syria following the fall of the Assad government, Araghchi said, "We do not make deci-

sions about Syria based on external changes, words and slogans." "We are waiting for the transitional government to announce its policies regarding the region and other countries and gain sufficient stability, and then we will make decisions based on behavior," he stated.

## Iran reviewing foreign investment hurdles, hopes for addressing challenges

### International Desk

Iran's government spokeswoman said a working group is reviewing the obstacles facing foreign investment in the country, expressing hope that Iran would witness the presence of investors from Europe and other countries in the next few months. Fatemeh Mohajerani said that there are two categories of countries. One is the member states of BRICS group of emerging economies, in which Iran is also a full member; that interactions with them are reviewed under BRICS, and the other is the non-BRICS countries, such as some European ones. "In the case of BRICS countries, these obstacles have been largely re-



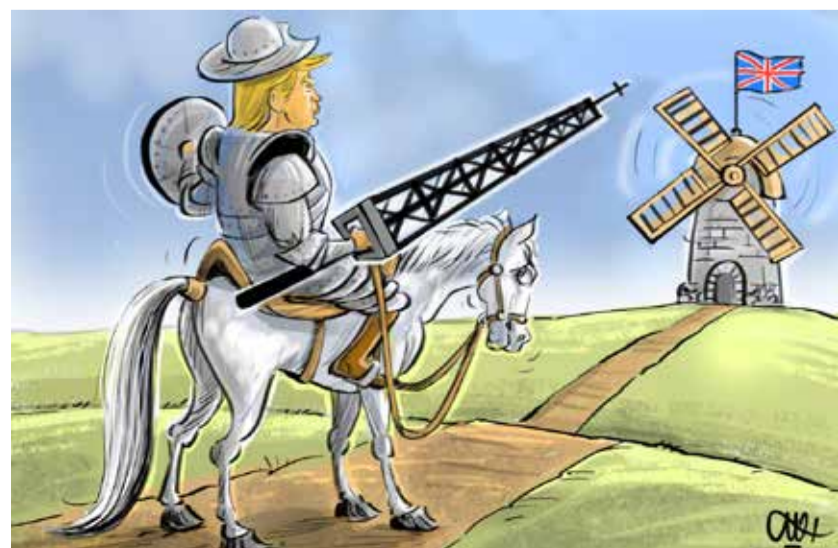
moved and we are witnessing investment in some projects by BRICS members, but in the case of non-BRICS countries, a working group is reviewing the situation and I hope that in the next few months, with the removal of obstacles, we will

witness the presence of investors from Europe and other countries." She said Iran enjoys very good relations with the BRICS member countries but this does not mean that it is disregarding relations with the West.

"Iran has very good relations with BRICS member countries, specifically China, India, and Russia, and we will continue to expand economic relations with all three countries. Of course, Iran pursues a balanced foreign policy, and naturally we give priority to the East and neighboring countries. Of course, this does not mean disregarding [relations with] the West," she said.

The Iranian official pointed to the economic and political agreements reached between Iran and the BRICS countries, which are home to roughly 3.3 billion people and over 40% of the global population. She referred to a comprehensive strategic cooperation treaty which is to be signed between Iran and Russia in the new future to promote relations between the two countries and a 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement reached between Iran and China in 2021 as well as good economic and political relations with India as a sign of Iran's extended relations with the countries in the East.

**Mohammad Ali Rajabi**  
Cartoonist



## IRGC launches military drill in western Iran



### International Desk

The Ground Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) began a military exercise, code-named Payambar-e-A'azam (Great Prophet) 19, in the western province of Kermanshah on Saturday. Mohammad Nazar Azimi, an IRGC commander, said that the first phase of the war game, which is aimed at enhancing defense capabilities of the forces, has started in the Oramanat region of Kermanshah with the participation of various specialized divisions and units of the IRGC Ground Force, IRNA reported.

He said that the focus of the military drill is on rapid reaction operations. The quick transfer of troops and military hardware to the exercise area was carried out in the first part of the drills. Iranian military forces hold routine exercises according to a de-

tailed schedule in various parts of the country in order to test their weaponry and equipment and evaluate their combat preparedness.

Emphasizing the importance of conducting such drills in the border areas, the IRGC commander said that Kermanshah region has seen many acts of bravery during the period of the Iraq's 1980s imposed war on Iran and in confronting opposition groups and the ongoing is being held to strengthen the capabilities of the armed forces and improve the security of the region.

Iran's Armed Forces hold routine military exercises throughout the year.

Iranian officials have repeatedly underscored that the country will not hesitate to strengthen its military capabilities, including its missile power, which are entirely meant for defense, and that Iran's defense capabilities will never be subject to negotiations.

# Iranian artist's vision turns Shiraz area into cultural hub, enlivens rustic district

In the winding alleys of southern Iran, artist Adel Yazdi has taken it upon himself to turn his rustic old neighbourhood into a cultural and tourist hub through vibrant paintings and carved relief faces.

Narenjestan, a neighbourhood characterised by crumbling, uninhabited houses, is nestled in Shiraz, a southern city celebrated for its historic architecture, lush gardens and revered poets, AFP reported.

"Most of the dilapidated walls in old Shiraz have no historical value," said Yazdi, a bushy-bearded, bespectacled 40-year-old artist who has dedicated himself to revitalising Narenjestan. Yazdi has over the years turned the long-neglected neighbourhood walls into a vivid visual tapestry "telling the stories of the people living here," he said.

Arabesque patterns and relief faces carved with intricate details and painted in an array of vivid hues of greens, pinks, blues and purples now adorn the walls.

With its striking designs and bright colours, Yazdi's art can be reminiscent of Surrealism. It often comes across as surprising, showcasing a different side of Iran's artistic heritage that goes beyond the conventional focus on Persian or Islamic architecture.

The artwork includes the face of Scheherazade, Yazdi said, referencing the legendary storyteller from the 'One Thousand and One Nights' collection of folktales.

Yazdi's work stands out in Shiraz where graffiti and murals are rare, becoming a social media sensation

and a tourist attraction.

One visitor, Mahdieh, discovered Yazdi's murals through Instagram.

"I arrived in Shiraz yesterday... and it was the first site I wanted to visit," said the 40-year-old, who declined to give her last name.

At the end of one alleyway, Yazdi has established his workshop in a century-old building with small rooms encircling a serene garden.

He also lives in the building, with a traditional Persian architectural style.

It is filled with artefacts and sculptures, resembling a museum warehouse. Replicas of Shia Muslim mosque doors feature prominently.

To Maedah, a 30-year-old engineer, Yazdi's house brings to mind "other historical places in the city, such as the Eram Garden and the Mausoleum of the Poet Hafez".

Yazdi said he drew inspiration from the Pompidou Centre in Paris, a cultural hub that transformed the heart of the French capital in the 1970s.

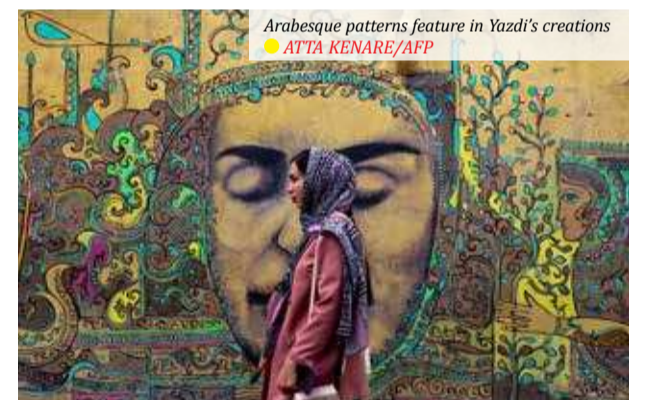
He hopes his efforts can turn Shiraz's alleyways into even more of a vibrant cultural centre as well.

At his residence, visitors are particularly drawn to what Yazdi calls "the Finger Room."

Inside, he installed around 14,000 finger sculptures on the ceiling, all pointing downward.

"The room is inspired by the legend of an angel that counts raindrops with thousands of fingers," he said, referring to an Islamic fable.

"These fingers are there to constantly remind us that the present moment is precious and that we must seize it."



## Women dominate 12th Iranian Ceramic Biennial with 75% of representations



### Arts & Culture Desk

The 12th Iranian Ceramic Biennial opened on January 3, 2025, with a remarkable display of talent from women artists, who constitute more than 75% of the works on display.

The event, attended by prominent figures including Zahra Behrouz-Azar, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, and Nadereh Rezaei, Deputy Culture Minister for Artistic Affairs, underscores the growing influence of women in the traditionally male-dominated field of ceramic art, ISNA reported.

Zahra Behrouz-Azar expressed her delight at the event's turnout, emphasizing the responsibility of officials to support these female creators and their ability to craft authentic narratives through art.

Behrouz-Azar noted the 7,000-year history of ceramics in Iran, emphasizing that the

exhibition reflects the ongoing brilliance of women in this ancient art form.

She called for strategies to enhance income opportunities for artists and foster job creation in the sector, acknowledging the need for more support and recognition of their talents.

Nadereh Rezaei reiterated the importance of maintaining the biennial amid competing festivals, stating that the Culture Ministry is committed to prioritizing such events to promote artistic equity across the country. She highlighted the potential of ceramics and other cultural fields in various regions of Iran and emphasized the need for a decentralized approach to cultural events, aligning them with local capacities and educational advantages.

Mojtaba Qorbani-Shahkoochaki, the biennial's secretary, pointed out the rich heritage of Iranian ceramics and the challenges faced by artists, especially amid economic pressures.

He stressed the importance of establishing university courses in ceramics to bolster this art form.

Qorbani-Shahkoochaki also celebrated the collaboration among different generations of artists, showcasing that collective efforts can lead to significant achievements in the arts.

The biennial will continue until January 31, 2025, inviting art enthusiasts to explore the diverse and vibrant expressions of ceramic artistry from talented women and men alike.

## Surge in influenza cases in Iran raises alarm for vulnerable groups

### Social Desk

Iran is experiencing a notable increase in influenza cases, with reports indicating a 20% rise in the disease's prevalence.

Health experts warn that the current peak of influenza cases is expected to continue until January 20.

He urged these groups to avoid crowded places and wear masks to prevent infection.

Iran's Health Ministry stated that in the last week of December, influenza accounted for approximately 22% of all respiratory infections reported in the country, making it the leading cause of respiratory illness.

According to Qobad Moradi, head of the health ministry's division of communicable disease control, nearly 40% of patients hospitalized for respiratory infections are being treated for influenza. The dominant strain is identified as H1N1, which is recognized as the seasonal flu. Recent laboratory findings show that between 21% and 23% of respiratory infections in late December were attributed to influenza, indicating a gradual increase over the past two months.

Moradi emphasized the importance of adhering to health guidelines, particularly for high-risk groups, which include the elderly, individuals with underlying health conditions, pregnant women, and those with weakened immune systems.

Hamid Emadi, an infectious disease specialist, highlighted that children typically encounter respiratory infections 6 to 12 times a year, but the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this pat-



tern, leading to a resurgence of infections in recent years.

Vaccination against influenza is crucial, especially for vulnerable populations.

Infectious disease specialist and professor at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences Shahnaz Sali noted that while the effectiveness of the vaccine is around 60% to 65%, it significantly reduces the severity of symptoms and complications.

She also stated that the best time for vaccination is between late September and mid-October, but those who missed this window can still receive the vaccine at the end of December or early February.

The Health Ministry continues to provide vaccines, urging the public to take vaccination seriously to help reduce the spread of the virus and alleviate pressure on the healthcare system.