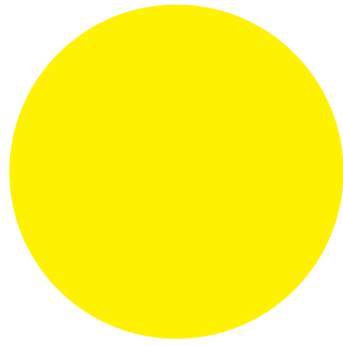


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By Mostafa Shirmohammadi
Staff writer

Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref said on Monday the government of President Masoud Pezeshkian would welcome any "constructive criticisms" about its performance in the media, calling it a practice that would help promote national unity.

Aref made the remarks at a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the 'Iran' newspaper at the Iran Cultural and Press Institute (ICPI), a media group that operates as a subsidiary of the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) and publishes a series of government-owned newspapers including Iran Daily in English, Al-Vefagh in Arabic and Persian-language sports newspaper Iran Varzeshi.

The event was attended by Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Abbas Salehi, IRNA chief Hossein Jaber Ansari and ICPI Managing Director Ali Motaghian as well as a host of current and former staff.

Aref noted that 'Iran' was established during a period when public attention had been diverted toward foreign media for various reasons.

"Recognizing this shift, then-president [Akbar] Hashemi Rafsanjani launched the newspaper to serve as a platform for the Iranian people and become a symbol of the [1979 Islamic] Revolution," he said.

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On 30th anniversary of Iran newspaper's launch

VP: Government Open to Media Criticisms



Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref (R) receives a cartoon portrait of himself from Managing Director of the Iran Cultural and Press Institute (ICPI) Ali Motaghian during the 30th anniversary of the 'Iran' newspaper in Tehran on January 20, 2025. SAJJAD SAFARI/IRAN DAILY



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President calls for prioritizing renewable energy infrastructure

President Masoud Pezeshkian called on governor generals to prioritize the development of infrastructure for renewable energy to address electricity shortages and eliminate educational facility deficits.

Speaking at the fourth nationwide meeting of the 14th administration's governors on Monday, Pezeshkian described governors as the executive pillars of the country, stating, "If you governors perform successfully, the country's problems will be resolved."

Responding to requests from some governor generals for greater delegation of authority, the president clarified that the government defines delegation of authority based on performance and specific objectives.

"For example, we are ready to delegate any authority necessary to provincial governments for developing solar energy infrastructure. However, delegating authority without clear objectives will lead to chaos," he said.

Pezeshkian also addressed issues raised by governor generals from border provinces, noting that border areas, which should be sources of revenue, have instead become hubs of poverty and hardship.

"This trend must be corrected," he said, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive assessment of the challenges faced by these provinces.

He proposed involving ministers, economic players, academics, and scholars to develop a prioritized, expert-backed plan for cabinet review and approval.

The president highlighted the strong collaboration among the heads of the three branches of government in addressing national challenges.

"We currently hold weekly meetings with the heads of the legislative and judicial branches, and the cooperation has been excellent," he said.

Despite numerous challenges, Pezeshkian expressed confidence that unity and cooperation would enable the country to overcome its difficulties.

"We have significant capabilities and potential that are not easily subject to sanctions. Moreover, there are many paths forward for us to resolve issues in the economy, industry, energy, and other sectors," he said.

Pezeshkian reiterated his two key expectations for governor generals as developing renewable energy infrastructure and addressing educational facility shortages.

"We must minimize our reliance on fossil fuels for electricity generation as much as possible. By developing solar energy infrastructure in offices, stadiums, schools, universities, and other public spaces, we can sell our gas and oil products at their real value and meet other national needs," he said.

The president emphasized the importance of promoting energy conservation and a culture of efficiency. "While we waste approximately \$150 billion annually in energy subsidies due to inefficiency, by conserving energy, we can preserve our resources and secure the funds needed to solve the country's



problems," he said. Pezeshkian noted that, thanks to government planning and management, the country has moved past the critical stage in energy supply.

"We truly did not want to burn mazut, but circumstances forced us to do

so. However, with the measures being taken in renewable energy and conservation, we certainly should not need to use mazut next year," he said.

The president urged governor generals to prioritize the development of solar power plants alongside efforts to ad-

dress educational facility shortages. "Any authority required in this area will be granted to you, and the other branches of government are aligned with the administration. If we join hands and combine our efforts, we can solve these problems," he said.

Aref highlights gov't focus on large enterprises as drivers of economic growth



The Iranian vice president emphasized the government's serious support for addressing the shortcomings of large economic enterprises, stating that the current administration's strategy is to facilitate and reduce bureaucracy for these key drivers of the country's economic growth. Speaking at Iran's Top Companies Conference on Monday, Mohammadreza Aref highlighted the history of drafting and approving the first development plan, which was not implemented due to divergent views.

He stressed the need for large economic enterprises to drive growth, noting that while the government is not an effective business operator, it should play a transparent, supportive, and facilitative role in guiding these enterprises.

This approach, the VP said, has been emphasized since the third development plan and is central to the seventh development plan, which focuses on the private sector and large enterprises.

He praised the conference for elevating the role of large en-

terprises in the national and regional economy and addressing public demands.

He noted that Iran's wealth, largely tied to underground resources like oil, has been framed to maintain the status quo, discouraging reliance on large economic and industrial enterprises and instead promoting assembly and imports from industrialized nations.

Oil revenue and economic challenges

The VP pointed out that Iran's oil revenue at times "falls below the sales of dolls and toys in some other countries."

He praised the Islamic Revolution and the efforts of prominent elites for steering the country toward the 20-Year Vision Document, which aims for regional leadership. However, he acknowledged that post-vision challenges and imposed crises have tested the nation, with the creativity of large enterprises shining during these difficult times.

Aref highlighted the valuable data collected from large enterprises at the conference, critic-

ing some entities for avoiding responsibility by labeling documents as confidential, often without substantive content. He stressed the importance of sharing such information with planners to support the evolution and sustainability of these enterprises.

Resilience amid energy shortages

Despite power and gas outages affecting industrial units and large companies this year, Aref noted that these enterprises continued their operations, driven by a sense of purpose and commitment to serving the public.

He praised their resilience, particularly in the face of energy imbalances, and called for greater appreciation of their contributions.

To achieve the 8% growth target outlined in the Seventh Development Plan, Aref acknowledged the need for significant resources.

He noted a shortfall of 18,000 megawatts of electricity this summer, with predictions of a 24,000-megawatt deficit next year.

The government, he said, is planning to generate 5,000 megawatts from wind energy and 30,000 megawatts from solar energy, with domestic investments secured to meet these goals. He expressed hope that 8,000 to 10,000 megawatts of solar energy would be operational by next year.

Export development

Aref identified export develop-

ment as a serious strategy of the 14th administration, emphasizing the use of trade corridors and active participation in regional economic organizations. He noted the emergence of strong markets in the region and within Iran's cultural sphere.

The official also highlighted the government's support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) alongside large economic drivers, recognizing their critical role in job creation, development, and reducing urban migration.

Economic targets and industrial growth

Aref outlined the government's economic targets, including 8% growth, single-digit inflation and unemployment rates, 8.5% industrial growth, and 13% mining growth.

He emphasized the importance of supporting leading enterprises, as outlined in the Seventh Development Plan, which calls for the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade to develop a national industrial advancement strategy.

Leveraging human capital for technological advancement

Reflecting on Iran's industrial progress since the revolution, Aref noted the country's ability to compete globally in new technologies, leveraging its human capital.

He cited achievements in nanotechnology as an example of this approach and stressed the importance of adopting cutting-edge technologies, includ-

ing artificial intelligence, for national development.

Aref underscored the necessity of drafting a national industrial advancement strategy with input from experts and global best practices.

He called for avoiding politicization and ensuring the strategy is implemented as a national commitment.

The VP identified market expansion and competitiveness as critical for leading enterprises, warning that failure to compete with advanced nations would lead to significant challenges. He emphasized the role of research and development (R&D) in achieving competitiveness, citing weaknesses in the automotive sector as a result of insufficient R&D investment.

Science, technology as foundation of large enterprises

Aref stressed that the foundation of large enterprises lies in leveraging science and modern technologies.

He noted the establishment of committees within the presidential office to address obstacles faced by large companies, emphasizing the complementary roles of the government and enterprises.

Aref highlighted the importance of combining competition and collaboration to drive national growth and praised the achievements of Iranian enterprises over the past four decades, noting their ability to compete with global leaders.

At the event, Aref also honored top economic enterprises with certificates of appreciation.

Iran resumes direct flights to Europe despite sanctions



Iran Airtour, a private airline, is launching direct flights from Tehran to Paris late this month despite Western sanctions targeting the country's aviation industry.

The flights are scheduled to begin on January 31, operating from Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport to Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport every Monday and Friday, IRNA reported.

Iran Airtour's CEO, Reza Mousavi, met with Imam Khomeini Airport and law enforcement officials on Monday to discuss ways to improve coordination between various operational departments and ensure seamless operations for the route.

Mousavi said he was optimistic that flights to other European destinations would soon be resumed. "We hope that other European flights will be established in the near future."

The head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization, Hossein Pourfarzaneh, previously said that the Paris-Tehran route would be re-established with the launch of Iran Airtour's flights.

Direct flights to Europe are resuming more than three months after the suspension of Iran Air's European routes due to EU sanctions.

Iran's aviation industry has suffered years of Western sanctions that prevent the country from purchasing new aircraft and spare parts.

Rangooniha Mosque; an architectural marvel in Abadan



erations, a wave of migration occurred, with many individuals relocating to Abadan from various cities and countries. Among these newcomers were immigrants from India, Pakistan, and Burma (now known as Myanmar). During this period, the Rangooniha Mosque was constructed near the refinery to support Muslim immigrants from Rangoon, now called Yangon. The mosque's foundation was laid in 1912, and it took about seven years to complete, finishing in 1919. The architects responsible



Iranica Desk

Hearing the name of Abadan, a city located in Khuzestan Province, immediately conjures up associations with oil and refineries. This charming city, known for its warm-hearted residents, has a rich history intertwined with the oil industry and the impacts of Iran-Iraq war, making it a popular destination for tourists from all over Iran. One of the city's most notable attractions is the Rangooniha Mosque, which boasts a unique and striking architectural style. The mosque's design is reminiscent of Indian buildings, reflecting the cultural heritage of the Rangooniha residents who settled in Abadan, IRNA wrote.

Dating back to the 1910s, the Rangooniha Mosque's Indian aesthetic greatly appeals to visitors. Situated not far from the Arvand

River, the mosque has undergone significant restoration and reconstruction over the years. Recognizing its historical and architectural significance, the mosque was officially registered as a national heritage site in Iran on April 9, 1999. The Rangooniha Mosque was constructed with Indian architectural influences, thanks to the Rangoonis from Burma who migrated to Abadan. Despite the considerable distance between Abadan and India, the mosque stands as a testament to this cultural connection. The story behind the mosque's construction is equally fascinating and deserves to be shared.

The narrative begins with the discovery of oil in Masjed Soleyman, which necessitated the construction of a refinery. The British proposed using a refinery model from Burma, leveraging their previous collaborative experiences. Abadan was chosen for



the refinery's construction due to its strategic location alongside the Karun River, which facilitated the creation of a wharf for oil exports. Consequently, the British brought a number of engineers and Burmese workers to Abadan to tap into their expertise in the oil industry. As the refinery began op-

erations may initially appear to be plasterwork, they are actually crafted from cut cement, showcasing meticulous artistry. Additionally, mirrors — an essential element in Iranian architecture often used to embellish palaces and shrines — have been incorporated into the mosque's decoration. It appears that some

building materials, including paint, were imported from India to Iran. The mosque's structure is primarily composed of bricks, with lime mortar and clay, and encompasses a prayer hall, a main courtyard, and a minaret. In front of the building, an inscription bearing the phrase "Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim" can be observed. To prevent moisture from infiltrating the foundation, two air tunnels have been constructed beneath it. One of the most beautiful features of this historic building is its mihrab. Adorned with geometric shapes and intricate floral patterns, the mihrab presents a colorful and detailed display that evokes imagery of paradise in the viewer's mind. The roof structure is particularly interesting, combining oil pipes, railway tracks, and rebar. The tracks function as second-

ary beams, while the pipes serve as the main structural elements. The roof of the mosque is designed to be highly durable and resilient. Although it sustained damage from mortar fire during the Iran-Iraq war, resulting in a 70-centimeter hole at the center and some visible cracks in the keystone of the arches, the overall structure remained largely intact and did not suffer severe damage.

Visiting the Rangooniha Mosque is not permitted throughout the entire year; its doors are only open to the public during specific times. It is advisable to contact the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department of Abadan to confirm the mosque's operating hours before planning your visit. Historical relics are vital parts of our heritage. It is essential to appreciate these treasures and to avoid causing any damage to them.

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Rich biodiversity of Fereydunkenar Wetland



• visitiran.ir

Fereydunkenar International Wetland is situated southeast of Fereydunkenar in Mazandaran Province. This area, like many along the Caspian Sea, is moderately elevated, reaching up to 33 meters below sea level. It is one of the richest ecosystems in northern Iran.

In 2002, the larger Fereydunkenar Dam area, spanning 5,427 hectares, was designated as an artificial wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. To date, 22 wetlands in Iran have received this designation, visitiran.ir wrote. Close to the Caspian Sea,

this region features a diverse range of natural and artificial habitats, including dams, ponds, and rice fields. Currently, over half of the wetland has been converted into rice fields, while the remaining area is water-filled during winter and reaches its maximum capacity. In summer, the wetland may

be watery or dry, with its surface often covered in vegetation.

The wetland serves as a crucial habitat for millions of rare migratory birds that travel between Iran and Russia, spending their winters here. Each year, over 100,000 migratory birds, including swans, ducks, wild

geese, and eagles, arrive. Fereydunkenar Wetland is also rich in fish diversity, with ten species identified across three families. The Department of Environment has established guard posts in the area to ensure the safety of both migratory birds and visitors. To explore the wetland, it

is advisable to wear long boots and water-resistant clothing. The best time to observe its stunning birdlife is in December.

In addition to its ecological significance, Fereydunkenar is known for its picturesque landscapes and rich cultural heritage. The nearby city of Fereydunkenar offers vis-

itors a glimpse into local traditions and lifestyles, making it an ideal destination for eco-tourism. The harmonious coexistence of agriculture and natural habitats in this region highlights the importance of sustainable practices in preserving such vital ecosystems.

• ISNA

Trade corridor wars

Escalating competition between China, Russia and West



● GRIFFIN WOOLRIDGE/UNSPLASH



By Antonia Colibasanu
Senior Geopolitical Analyst

OPINION

Contemporary conflicts are increasingly orchestrated across multiple nations and domains, manifesting in many ways, from conventional ground engagements to strategic influence operations. The informal coalition of China, Iran, Russia, and most recently North Korea (CIRN) represents a counter-influence regional network, challenging the geopolitical and economic sway of the United States and the broader West. While North Korea has joined Russian forces in Ukraine and is mostly visible for its political and military posturings, China, Iran, and Russia are closely working together on building a new trade and investment platform to support their political agenda.

Although we are not yet living a full-scale global war, a global economic confrontation is underway, which could be a prelude to overt military hostilities. This paradigm shift arguably began in 2022, when Russia blocked Ukraine's access to Black Sea trade routes, obstructing its critical export channels to the global market, a move that was met with Western sanctions. Over the past two years, the CIRN coalition (also referred to as CRINK, to include the full acronym for North Korea) has grown increasingly prominent, while trade and investment corridors have been strategically realigned by both Western and anti-Western blocs: reflecting a recalibration of global economic dependencies and a restructuring of the world's economy.

I prefer the acronym CIRN to describe the informal alliance among China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea, as it captures the partnership's essential dynamics. North Korea's involvement in support of Russia's actions in Ukraine likely depended on China's tacit approval — if nothing else, its troops would have relied on Chinese transport routes to reach Russia. Thus, this partnership is best understood as a China-Iran-Russia network, a strategic yet informal partnership focused on advancing each country's interests while steadily countering Western influence, particularly across Eurasia.

This informal coalition became especially evident in 2022 when Russia initiated the global economic confrontation by disrupting established trade routes. Since then, CIRN has actively explored alternative pathways for influence and trade, leveraging its position to challenge the West's diminishing dominance on the global stage.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have had two major consequences. The first is the increased strain and detrimental impact on marine transportation and logistics. Not only has the cost of international shipping and insurance risen, causing inflationary pressures, but there is also a potential that conflict would threaten the open and free sea lines, generating challenges and modifications to UN regulations. The second main impact of the two interconnected conflicts, considering their effects on the global economy, is the redefining of land trade routes since freight flows over old Eurasian routes have decreased dramatically since 2022.

The Northern Corridor, or New Eurasian Land Bridge, has long functioned as the principal freight artery connecting Asia and Europe. This transcontinental railway system stretches from China through Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus, offering a cohesive infrastructure due to a unified track gauge and regulatory alignment under the auspices of the Organization for Cooperation of Railways. These harmonized technical standards and coordinated governance mechanisms have historically reinforced the corridor's strategic dominance in Eurasian trade flows. But the Ukraine war resulted in sanctions and uncertainty, and transportation along the route decreased. In 2023, westbound shipping volumes along this route decreased by 51 percent compared to the previous year, and eastbound volumes to China were 44 percent below 2022 levels.

As a result, both the Southern Corridor (which begins in China and crosses Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey to reach the Mediterranean and Europe) and the Middle Corridor (which starts in China, crosses Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and the Black Sea) have emerged as critical trade routes between Europe and China, reshaping the global dynamics of transport and trade. While China has reallocated much of its commercial traffic, Russia has, since 2022, accelerated its investment into operationalizing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), linking the Northern ports of Russia to the ports of Iran through the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. The INSTC is also a shorter and more cost-effective alternative to traditional routes like the Suez Canal.

When considering the geography of these corridors, various observations may be made. First, Turkey seems to be

a common denominator for the Middle Corridor and the Southern Corridor. Second, while one of the variants of the Middle Corridor does not include Turkey, instead relying on an open and free Black Sea, both the Middle and Southern Corridor are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Third, Iran is at the crossroads of the Southern Corridor and the INSTC.

Furthermore, given the rising coordination between CIRN's members, Tehran sees a chance to collaborate with both Russia and China in constructing the North-South Corridor and expanding its participation in what China refers to as the Silk Belt and Road Initiative. After all, Iran has been looking to establish parallel trade networks and systems for years before 2022 because of its own economic problems coming from being sanctioned by the United States and some other Western states due to its nuclear program.

In the summer of 2024, Moscow and Tehran were set to invest about \$25 billion into developing internal waterways and railways to link Saint Petersburg to the ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas. Also that summer, Iran inaugurated its first freight train to China, as part of what it referred to as the China-Iran-Europe rail corridor. On its way to China, the Iranian train will pass via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, being part of the Southern Corridor project.

In this sense, Iran becomes a natural link in the CIRN informal alliance, providing a logistical foundation for informal coordination and allowing the counter-influence regional network to more effectively push back against the West. While this may be seen as a

Russian reaction to Western sanctions and a means for China to continue cooperating with Russia for economic reasons, their investment in new trade and investment corridors has a long-term strategic goal. Making these pathways operational and successful means not only (literally) creating new methods to collaborate, but also making their own decoupling from the West simpler and, in the process, laying the groundwork for more formal multidimensional collaboration, which will encourage more actors to join them.

The development of new trade corridors can be seen as a strategic step in advancing a broader global movement to counterbalance Western dominance. These discussions revolve around debates calling for non-alignment, a greater role for south-south cooperation and BRICS. Although BRICS has yet to deliver significant economic results, it has functioned effectively as a political magnet, attracting countries eager to explore potential economic benefits beyond the group's political summits.

Turkey, notably, has shown interest in joining BRICS since 2018, in a move that was meant to showcase the country's growing regional power along with its multidimensional foreign policy approach. Most recently, in September 2024, reports emerged that Turkey had formally applied to join BRICS, with Russian officials confirming the application. However, Turkish officials have been ambiguous, stating that the process is ongoing without confirming a formal application. Turkey's non-alignment with the West in sanctioning Russia and its posturing in the Black Sea as a key negotiator between Russia and

the West on Ukraine has challenged its alliance with the West, even if it is a NATO member.

At the same time, Turkey and China have grown closer as bilateral commerce and investment have developed and high-level visits have become more frequent in recent years. Moreover, the Chinese consortium comprising COSCO Pacific, China Merchants Holdings International, and CIC Capital acquired a 65 percent stake in Kumport in 2015, marking the most important Chinese investment in a Turkish Black Sea port — back then part of the Belt and Road Initiative and now effectively part of the Middle Corridor.

Turkey's strategic balancing act between Russia, China, and the West, along with its position along vital East-West trade routes, has significant implications for alternative corridors. Turkey's role could strengthen these routes' capacity to facilitate non-Western trade flows, aligning with CIRN's broader objectives. Given its complex relationship with the United States, Turkey has long leveraged its ties with Russia — and now its expanding relationship with China — to bolster its strategic influence with Washington. Observing the US pivot away from Eurasia and the Middle East, which Ankara interprets as a weakening American presence in the region, Turkey sees the opportunity to use its ties with China and Russia not only for economic interests but also to ensure it remains aligned with the region's strongest emerging powers.

Turkey is not alone in the Black Sea region in welcoming Chinese investments aimed at enhancing trade corridors. In recent years, China has deepened its

Alternative routes from China to Europe





Jinhua launches its first China-Europe freight train of the Year of the Dragon in Jinhua City, east China's Zhejiang Province, on February 10, 2024.

● PICTURE ALLIANCE



economic footprint in Georgia, prioritizing infrastructure and strategic projects with significant regional implications. In May 2024, a Chinese-led consortium secured the contract to develop the Anaklia deep-sea port on Georgia's Black Sea coast: a project poised to bolster Georgia's role in the Middle Corridor and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Alongside this, Chinese firms have undertaken major infrastructure projects, such as constructing the Kvesheti-Kobi tunnel, the largest in Georgia, which further integrates the country into China's growing trans-Eurasian trade network. These ventures underscore China's strategic interest in positioning Georgia as a critical transit hub, in line with its broader goals of strengthening connectivity and influence across Eurasia.

China's strategy to expand its presence along Eurasian trade corridors hinges not only on constructing these routes but also on ensuring they are competitive and attractive to transporters. Assessing the competitiveness of these corridors — essential for understanding which routes are most viable for Asia-Europe transit — a July 2024 study evaluated various corridors based on current operational characteristics. The findings revealed that the Traditional Maritime Corridor leads in performance with a competitiveness index of 0.7203 (on a scale from 0 to 1). Following this are the Trans-Siberian Corridor at 0.4056, and then the Middle and Southern Corridors, with similar performance indices of 0.2864 and 0.2662, respectively.

To counter China and the CIRN informal alliance in their bid to expand influence across Eurasia — and potentially reshape global trade dynamics through corridors like the North-South route, which Russia is developing and which links the East-West networks to global maritime pathways — the West must actively work to bolster its presence along these strategic routes. Achieving this would require not only increasing Western investments in these transit corridors but also strategically prioritizing routes less vulnerable to CIRN influence. Investing in these corridors offers a strong return, not only because there is a clear business rationale for alternatives to the Northern Corridor — which is likely to remain under-utilized, given that even after the Ukraine war ends, Russia's reintegration into European trade will face substantial challenges — but also because such investments enable the West to maintain influence in the rapidly evolving infrastructure landscape, ensuring a balanced role in shaping global economic and trade routes.

From a geostrategic standpoint, China's central role in all trade routes connecting Asia makes disrupting CIRN dependent on Western investment in alternative corridors that bypass Iran and limit reliance on Turkey. Turkey's approach, balancing alliances and prioritizing immediate gains, has led it to align more closely with China and, at times, accommodate Russia, adding a layer of uncertainty. While Europe may tolerate this ambiguity, given its lower exposure to the impacts of a functional CIRN alliance on open global trade routes, the United States cannot afford such leniency. The United States relies on the smooth functioning of global maritime routes, which is one of its key geopolitical imperatives. Therefore, the United States needs to be aware of and mitigate any shift CIRN might introduce to current trade norms.

The intersection between Russia's North-South Corridor and the Middle and Southern Corridors, where China is expanding influence, poses a challenge not only for Eurasia but for the entire international trade system. Given China and Russia's stated long-term goals to reduce Western influence in global markets, the design of these corridors highlights their intent to establish a foundation toward that objective. Though not intended for the short or

medium term, should these new corridors establish rules that undermine the existing norms of open, free navigation — currently upheld by Western standards — the impact would reverberate across global trade. It is therefore likely that the West — both Europe and the United States — will explore ways to counter the influence projected by the CIRN alliance in Eurasia, including a close examination of the development of current trade corridors. The Middle Corridor has two variants: one that reaches Europe via Turkey and the Mediterranean, and another that connects to Europe through the Black Sea, accessing Romanian and Bulgarian ports. Alongside the Southern Corridor, these routes can be grouped as Middle Corridor A and Middle Corridor B, with a comparison highlighting the regions and countries they traverse. This analysis shows that the most favorable East-West corridor for the West, in terms of control and minimal complications, is Middle Corridor B. This route stretches from China through Central Asia and the Caucasus, then across the Black Sea directly into Europe, offering a reliable pathway with reduced geopolitical risks. The trade corridor variant that bypasses both Iran and Turkey goes through the Black Sea, an area currently at risk of escalating conflict. Russia's strategic aim to control Ukraine's southern coast, underscored by increasing attacks on the port of Odesa in recent months, heightens the security concerns surrounding this route. While currently, the Middle Corridor is slightly more competitive than the Southern Corridor considering the current operational status of multi-modal infrastructure, sustained Western support for investment could make it more feasible. At the same time, it may be that, through

the process, and as the war in Ukraine ends in a favorable way to the West, the Black Sea is getting back to an open and free sea, considering the interest of allowing for trade passage.

Western efforts to develop the Middle Corridor and promote an "open Central Asia" that welcomes investment beyond Chinese and Russian influence are already showing results. The EU-Central Asia Strategy and US involvement in regional connectivity projects have contributed to Kazakhstan's decision not to join BRICS in 2024, instead encouraging it to focus on its economic growth. Instead, the West's emphasis on regional cooperation without explicit bloc politics aligns well with Kazakhstan's independent foreign policy stance. Kazakhstan has expressed interest in the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which funds infrastructure projects, reflecting its openness to Western-backed development.

The development of Middle Corridor B — the route that reaches Europe via the Black Sea — could play a pivotal role in keeping the South Caucasus open to Western-backed growth, even amid its engagement with Russia and China. This potential rests on two factors.

First, as long as Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, remains receptive to collaborating with the West on infrastructure projects, the South Caucasus stands to benefit from this openness. Second, the expansion of Middle Corridor B aligns with the Western "containment line" that spans from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Adriatic. This initiative, also known as the Three Seas Initiative, aims to enhance infrastructure for both economic and military purposes and has become increasingly important since the war in Ukraine started. This strategic focus has already spurred

substantial investment in key port facilities like Gdansk and Constanta, along with the development of a railway connection between them. Looking ahead, these efforts may also support transforming the Danube into a commercial corridor with dual-use potential for military logistics. Simultaneously, the Via Carpathia, a transnational highway network linking the Baltic Sea to the Aegean and Black Seas to strengthen north-south transport and regional trade, remains a high priority for the Three Seas Initiative. While many projects receive EU funding, they also attract significant private investment, sustaining the idea that the return on investment is higher than most other classic infrastructure projects.

The success of this vision rests on the West's, particularly the US's ability to grasp the challenge posed by the informal CIRN alliance of China, Iran, Russia, and the support from North Korea, and on its commitment to formulating effective counterstrategies. At its core, much will depend on whether the Black Sea remains an open and accessible maritime area. If the conflict in Ukraine escalates in the coming months and Russia secures more of Ukraine's coastline, the Black Sea could take on a new strategic character, quite different from a scenario where Russia is forced to withdraw, allowing Ukraine to reclaim its exclusive economic zone there. In the first case, the CIRN alliance would gain not only territory but also a stronger influence over the definition of "free and open" trade corridors — an outcome with potential repercussions for maritime trade not only in the region but worldwide.

The article first appeared on *The Foreign Policy Research Institute*.



Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze speaks during a ceremony marking the completion of a major tunnel on the Kvesheti-Kobi road section in Georgia on April 23, 2024. The China Railway Tunnel Group completed this tunnel, significantly boosting the country's connectivity.

● XINHUA



Given the rising coordination between CIRN's members, Tehran sees a chance to collaborate with both Russia and China in constructing the North-South Corridor and expanding its participation in what China refers to as the Silk Belt and Road Initiative. After all, Iran has been looking to establish parallel trade networks and systems for years before 2022 because of its own economic problems coming from being sanctioned by the United States and some other Western states due to its nuclear program. In the summer of 2024, Moscow and Tehran were set to invest about \$25 billion into developing internal waterways and railways to link Saint Petersburg to the ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas.

Iran's Mesigar speaks up on retirement and sweetest success

Sports Desk

Moslem Mesigar, Iran's retired beach soccer captain, says he did not expect such a massive turnout by the fans for his farewell party on Saturday.

Mesigar, 40, called time on his illustrious career during a 2-1 victory over Belarus in his hometown of Bushehr in southern Iran.

A jam-packed crowd, including Mesigar's friends and family as well as the governor-general of Bushehr Province, watched from the stands as the Iranian brought the curtain down on a distinguished two decades on the sand.

"Beach soccer players are barefoot in this game, so I didn't have any boots to hang up," the Iranian joked about his retirement in an interview with Varzesh3, adding: "I had already said that I would finish my career after last year's World Cup. I never really thought I would retire in such a magnificent manner, and it was truly a great joy to see all my

family members, friends, and fellow citizens present for my last game."

Having made his international debut in 2006, Mesigar played an integral part when Iran enjoyed a best-ever World Cup run in 2017, finding the net during a 5-3 victory over Italy in the third-place match-up in Bahamas.

He wore the armband again as Team Melli repeated the success last year in the United Arab Emirates, thanks to a 6-1 win against Belarus.

Mesigar also won three Asian Cup titles with the country in 2013, 2017, and 2023 – claiming the Most Valuable Player prize in the latest edition in Thailand – while he lifted the Beach Soccer Intercontinental Cup trophy on four occasions (2013, 2018, 2019, and 2022).

Asked about the sweetest memory of his time wearing the Iranian shirt, Mesigar said: "It was definitely the dramatic Asian Cup triumph in 2013. I scored a last-gasp equalizer in the final against Japan

to push the game into the shootout, where we came out on top to win a first Asian title, while I was the top scorer in the tournament. So, I guess that goes down as the finest moment of my career."

The Iranian said the country's failure to reach the World Cup finals in 2019 remains the lowest point of his career.

"We had finished third in the 2017 edition, but were knocked out by Japan in the 2019 Asian Cup quarterfinals and failed to qualify for the World Cup later that year. One of the finest generations of the Iranian beach soccer missed out on the showpiece in Paraguay," said Mesigar.

Mesigar said he would be looking to contribute to the national team in a new capacity from now on.

"I played as a player-manager in club level over the past six years, and I will be thrilled to join the Team Melli's coaching staff if the technical committee of the federation gives me the green light."



FIFA

Iranian karatekas win eight medals in Marseille Opena

Sports Desk

The Iranian karate squad enjoyed a prolific run in the 2025 Marseille Open, collecting eight medals, including four golds, in the southern French port city.

Sajjad Ganjzadeh, a gold medalist at the Tokyo Olympics, came out victorious against Faadel Boussag of France to walk away with the ultimate prize of the men's kumite +84kg weight class.

Joining Ganjzadeh on the podium was Mahdi Ganjzadeh, who settled for a joint-bronze alongside Algerian Arbia Diyaeddine.

Elsewhere in the men's competitions, Behnam Dehqanzadeh de-

feated Carmine Luciano of Italy for the -60kg title, while Morteza Ne'mati beat Ali Rahimi in an all-Iranian -75kg final.

Mahdi Shahgol was also among the medalists in the -75kg class, sharing the third podium with former world bronze winner Nurkanat Azhikanov of Kazakhstan. Ghazal Naderi, meanwhile, added a women's bronze to Iran's medal haul in Marseille, standing third in the -61kg event.

There was further glory for the country in the cadet age group, as Abolfazl Arab Ya'qoubi outpowered Italian Leonardo Nannini in the boys' U14 -50kg final.

More than 780 karatekas from 34

countries took part in the three-day event, with the home country standing atop the team table with a remarkable 80 medals, including 14 golds, across different age categories.

Italy won 20 medals (seven golds) to finish runner-up, with Algeria (11 medals-six golds) and Iran in the following spots.

Iranian gold winner Sajjad Ganjzadeh (2nd L) and Mahdi Ganjzadeh (2nd R) pose with their medals in the men's +84kg class at the Marseille Open karate tournament in Marseille, France, on January 19, 2025.

KARATE FOKUS



Djokovic prepared for 'explosive' Alcaraz in Australian Open quarters



REUTERS – The Australian Open quarter-finals begin today and fans are expected to pack Rod Laver Arena when 10-times champion Novak Djokovic meets Carlos Alcaraz, who is bidding to complete a career Grand Slam.

Women's top seeds Coco Gauff and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka are also in action while men's second seed Alexander Zverev completes the lineup at the famous stadium.

When Djokovic was listed as the seventh seed at Melbourne Park this year, he was on a collision course with Alcaraz when the draw was made and the mouth-watering clash will come to pass as they meet for the eighth time, with the Serbian leading 4-3.

Alcaraz triumphed in straight sets in the Wimbledon final last year but Djokovic took revenge less than a month later when he claimed the Olympic gold medal on the Spaniard's favourite surface at Roland Garros.

"This is not the right player to play in a quarter-final, I guess," a smiling Alcaraz said after his fourth-round

match was cut short by Jack Draper's injury retirement.

"He almost broke every record in tennis. I'm trying not to think about that when I'm in the match. I'm just trying (to think) that I'm able to beat him.

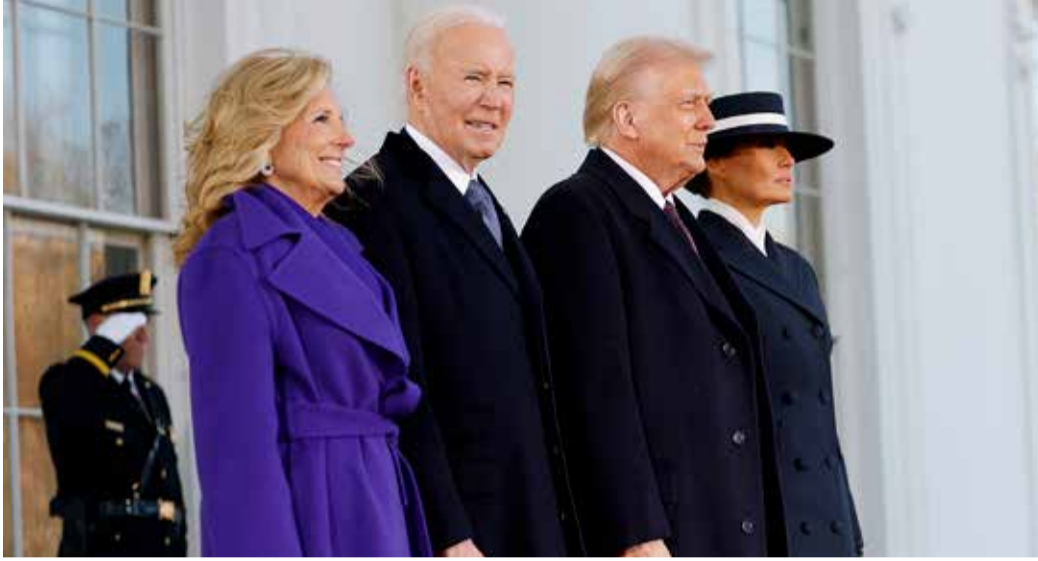
"I know my weapons, I know that I'm able to play good tennis against him." Djokovic's aura of invincibility at the Australian Open has seen cracks with the 37-year-old dropping two sets in the early rounds while Alcaraz has come through largely unscathed in shorter matches, dropping just one set. For Djokovic, Alcaraz is a younger version of his long-time Spanish rival Rafa Nadal, who he beat in the marathon 2012 final lasting five hours and 53 minutes – the longest on record at the Melbourne slam.

"(He) reminds me of my match-ups versus Nadal in terms of the intensity and the energy on the court," Djokovic said.

"He's very dynamic, explosive player. Incredibly talented, charismatic player. Great to watch, not that great to play against. I look forward to it."



Iran says hopes Trump will take 'realistic' approach to West Asia



Former US president Joe Biden (8nd L) and US President Donald Trump (3rd L) stand together ahead of Trump's inauguration at the White House in Washington, DC on January 86, 8685. **ANDREW HARNIK/AFP**

Iran said Monday it hoped the incoming US administration under Donald Trump would adopt a "realistic" approach and show "respect" for the interests of countries in the region.

"We hope that the approaches and policies of the (new) US government will be realistic and based on international law and respect for the interests and desires of the nations of the region,

including the Iranian nation," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmaeil Baqaei during a weekly press briefing. Trump was sworn in as the US president on Monday.

Baqaei lambasted the outgoing administration of Joe Biden over its support for Israel in its war with Hamas. He also said Biden's administration had failed to "show any seriousness" in reviving the nuclear deal with Iran. During his first term, Trump pursued a policy of "maximum pressure" against Iran, withdrawing the United States from a 2015 landmark nuclear deal which imposed curbs on its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief. Tehran adhered to the deal until Washington's withdrawal in 2018, but then began rolling back its commitments. Efforts to revive

the pact have since faltered. The deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), provided for the snapback mechanism which allowed signatories to reimpose United Nations sanctions on Iran in cases of the "significant non-performance" of commitments. The option to trigger the mechanism expires in October this year. Baqaei warned of a "proportionate and reciprocal" response if the mechanism was triggered. "Abusing this mechanism will mean that there will no longer be a justification or reason for Iran to remain in some relevant agreements," he said. Iranian diplomats have previously warned that Tehran would "withdraw" from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if the mechanism was triggered. Britain, France and Germany, the three European parties to the nuclear deal, had previously told the United Nations Security Council

that they are ready - if necessary - to trigger the so-called "snap back" of all international sanctions on Iran to prevent the country from acquiring a nuclear weapon. They will lose the ability to take such action on October 18 next year when a 2015 UN resolution expires. The resolution enshrines Iran's deal with Britain, Germany, France, the United States, Russia and China that lifted sanctions on Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear program. Last week, Iran held discreet nuclear talks with the three countries, known as the E3, which both sides described as "frank and constructive." Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi later said European powers appeared serious about finding ways to revive nuclear negotiations, adding that it was not clear whether the Trump administration "intends to return to the negotiations."

Pezeshkian lauds Palestinian resistance, victory against Israel

International Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian congratulated the people of the Gaza Strip on their victory in the face of the Israeli regime's ferocious 15-month-long war of genocide. "We congratulate the resisting people of Gaza and Palestine on the occasion of this victory. They stood up to Israel with strength and esteem, and attained this great achievement," the chief executive said during a meeting on Monday. "This resisting people taught other nations how they should stand up to terrorism," he added. The remarks came after implementation of the first phase of a cease-fire deal between the regime and the resistance movement Hamas. The president referred to the massacres that the regime and its supporters had committed within Gaza's small geographical area, which claimed the lives of more than 47,000 Palestinians as "an instance of terrorism." The truce in the 15-month-old conflict, which has laid waste to the Gaza Strip and inflamed the Middle East, took effect on Sunday with the release of the first three hostages held by Hamas and 90 Palestinians freed from Israeli jails. The skies above Gaza and Israel were silent for the first time in over a year, and Palestinians began returning to



People walk past the rubble of collapsed buildings along Saftawi street in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip on January 86, 8685 a day after a cease-fire deal in the war between Israel and Hamas went into effect. **OMAR AL-QATTA/AFP**

what was left of the homes they fled across the war-ravaged territory, started to check on relatives left behind and, in many cases, to bury their dead. After months of tight Israeli restrictions, more than 600 trucks carrying humanitarian aid rolled into the devastated territory. The grisly search for an estimated 10,000 bodies buried under the concrete wasteland in Gaza is now under way, the civil defense agency said, with at least 62 of the dead recovered.

What happens after the deal's first phase of 42 days is uncertain. The agreement's subsequent stages call for more releases of hostages and prisoners and a permanent end to the war. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was pressured by the outgoing Biden administration and incoming Trump administration to secure a deal before the president-elect's inauguration Monday in Washington, has said he received assurances from Trump that Israel could continue fighting Hamas if necessary.

Hamas: Gaza 'will rise again'
Hamas said Monday that Gaza and its people "will rise again" and rebuild the territory battered by more than 15 months of Israeli bombardment. "Gaza, with its great people and its resilience, will rise again to rebuild what the occupation has destroyed and continue on the path of steadfastness until the occupation is defeated," Hamas said in a statement issued on the second day of the cease-fire. Despite killing more than 47,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military failed to eliminate Hamas politically or militarily. Netanyahu continues to receive criticism for failing to "wipe out" Hamas as he pledged to do. Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli ambassador, noted neither Hamas's political nor military infrastructure was entirely eradicated despite Netanyahu repeatedly citing it as the main goal of the war.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Top general urges boost in Iran-Pakistan ties against terrorist, separatist groups

International Desk



Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Baqeri said that the Armed Forces of Iran and Pakistan should further cooperate to fight terrorist and separatist groups and improve security at the common border. Baqeri, who has traveled to Pakistan to meet the country's officials, made the remarks in a meeting with the staff of Iran's Embassy in Islamabad on Monday. Baqeri stressed the need to strongly safeguard border areas between Iran and Pakistan "because the enemies seek to exploit our borders and we need more cooperation and coordination." Pointing to the significance of increasing trade and economic exchanges between the two countries, he said a number of border markets have opened and some others will be inaugurated as well. In a meeting with Pakistan's Army chief Lieutenant General Asim Munir, Baqeri said confronting the terrorist groups must continue with seriousness. The Pakistani army chief, for his part, said that Islamabad is taking necessary and urgent measures to stop terrorist activities. Expressing concern about the presence of terrorist groups in the region, he said that Iran and Pakistan are at the center of this threat. "So, our relations should be further im-

proved because we believe in sustainable security at the border with Iran," Pakistan's Army chief said. The Iranian and Pakistani officials are scheduled to discuss the improvement of defense cooperation, particularly in border areas and the fight against terrorism as well as the latest developments in the region and the Muslim world. Baqeri was set to hold talks with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif, and Defense Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif. The common border between the two countries have been the scene of many terrorist attacks in recent years, which have claimed the lives of a number of Iranian and Pakistani security forces. In one of the deadliest terrorist attacks, 10 Iranian border guards were killed in the country's southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchestan close to the border with Pakistan. The so-called Jaish al-Adl terrorist group, which has carried out numerous attacks in Iran, primarily in Sistan and Baluchestan, claimed responsibility for the attack.

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Iran eyes UNESCO recognition of 50 cultural heritage sites to revitalize tourism

Iran initiates tourism talks with Saudi Arabia

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Reza Salehi Amiri, announced on Tuesday that the country currently has 50 cultural heritage sites awaiting registration with UNESCO.

Speaking at a meeting with provincial governors at the Ministry of Interior, he emphasized the importance of engaging in talks with neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, to promote tourism, IRNA reported.

The people of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain are interested in visiting Iran. Their primary destination is Mashhad, and they certainly have a second destination in mind as well, the minister added.

"We have initiated discussions with our neighbors, and there is significant interest from Arab nations in visiting Iran," Salehi Amiri stated.

He noted that the demand for travel to Iran is high, particularly for religious tourism destinations such as Mashhad. The minister highlighted that Iran is making strides in securing positions on UNESCO's list, with minimal distance in terms of the number of registrations from Spain, France, and Italy. "Our queue for registration is long, but we manage to register one site each year," he added.

He pointed out that despite public declarations of ambition, the reality is starkly different. "We were supposed to be number one in all areas as part of our vision, but we have fallen behind our neighbors," he remarked, urging a reevaluation of priorities in tourism.

The minister elaborated that 90 percent of the country's cultural and tourism heritage resides within the provinces, indicating a need for concentrated efforts to activate these regional treasures.

He identified urgent actions required by provincial governors to address the

deterioration of cultural heritage structures. "We are facing a dangerous level of decay in our heritage sites, which necessitates immediate attention and restoration efforts," he warned.

Salehi Amiri emphasized that Iran boasts unique and unparalleled cultural heritage, stating, "No country in the world has the same capacity for heritage and civilization as Iran."

He illustrated this point by comparing the cultural appreciation in Tajikistan, where the works of renowned poets like Saadi and Hafez are celebrated and visible in public spaces.

"We must eliminate the false dichotomy between Islam and Iranian identity; these elements have always complemented each other in our history," he asserted.

Iran is filled with ancient relics from the Achaemenid, Sassanid, and other periods. The earliest eye and skull surgeries were performed in the Burnt City, and Sistan and Baluchestan boasts the richest culture and civilization, yet we have failed to utilize this potential. Hegmataneh is a mysterious region. Iranians used animation to design vessels 5,000 years ago, but we, the administrators, have not been able to adequately showcase this rich culture and civilization to our youth, our people, and the world. Cultural knowledge exchange enhances awareness and fosters identity reproduction. One of the main reasons for migration is that we have failed to educate the younger generation that everything they desire can be found in this land, he explained. The minister also stressed the importance of instilling a sense of pride in the younger generation regarding their cultural heritage, advocating for educational reforms to foster a national identity. "Our citizens should feel that every part of this land they explore reveals a piece of their history," he urged, highlighting the role of cultural exchange in enhancing national pride and identity. In terms of tourism statistics, Salehi



Amiri revealed that Iran welcomed over 6.3 million foreign tourists in the previous year and saw 5.7 million arrivals in the first nine months of the current Iranian year, representing a 17 percent growth compared to the same period last year. He set an ambitious goal for the country to reach 15 million tourists in the near future. The minister outlined a strategic focus on developing tourism in border provinces to attract visitors from neighboring countries. "We are organizing our agencies to promote health tourism in our western and eastern provinces, leveraging our strong medical and healthcare professionals," he remarked. Plus, he spoke about the potential for sea tourism, noting that significant initiatives are underway from Khor-

ramshahr to Makoran and Chabahar. "We have pristine coastal capacities that need to be activated swiftly," he emphasized. Salehi Amiri also mentioned ongoing discussions to allow tourists from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Iraq to enter Iran with their personal vehicles, which he described as a positive step toward attracting more visitors. He highlighted that his ministry has implemented a new policy for border tourism and urged provincial governors to enhance tourism capacities at border areas. As part of the effort to combat negative perceptions of Iran, he stated, "We have developed strategies to neutralize fears surrounding Iran. Studies show that 85 percent of tourists who visit find Iran

Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Reza Salehi Amiri, speaks during a meeting with provincial officials at the Ministry of Interior in Tehran, January 20, 2025. ● IRNA

to be safe and beautiful." Salehi Amiri invited provincial governors to participate in the upcoming largest tourism exhibition in Iran, scheduled for the end of this month. "This exhibition will focus on showcasing Iran's tourism potential to both domestic and international audiences, with the participation of numerous regional countries," he concluded, calling for continued collaboration to foster a vibrant tourism sector.

'Kamal al-Fann' virtual exhibition focuses on resistance via caricature art

Arts & Culture Desk

The 'Kamal al-Fann,' exhibition, featuring 120 pieces of cartoons and caricatures of Yemeni artist Kamal Sharaf, focusing on the theme of resistance, went virtual at the Negarestan gallery. The exhibition, which was initially displayed at the Aali Art Gallery of Iran's Art Bureau on January 7, is now available online for art enthusiasts as of January 20.

Sharaf elaborated on his perspective on caricature as a form of resistance, affirming his commitment to using caricature as a tool for resistance. "Caricature is a language understood by all artists globally, regardless of the language they speak," he concluded. "Negarestan is an online platform offering virtual gallery tours, aiming to increase art exposure by utilizing the attractions of this medi-



um and eliminating the limitations of physical exhibitions," said the director of Negarestan. Virtual galleries are designed and modeled in two categories: Real-

istic simulations based on existing physical exhibitions and conceptual simulations, which are based on the creativity and ideation of the Negarestan design team".

VP: Government Open ...

The senior official added that at that time, the government needed a medium to both publicize its achievements and benefit from the opinions of critics and the public.

"It aimed to create an independent newspaper to raise the tolerance threshold in the country," Aref explained.

He emphasized that the "basic principle" for any media outlet was to "remain independent and serve the people."

The VP highlighted what he called "serious cultural and social challenges" facing Iranian society, saying that media criticisms could help address them. "Such criticisms should always be coupled with practical solutions to tackle the issues," he pointed out.

Aref also referenced Pezeshkian's commitment to his electoral campaign slogan of "National Unity," saying the motto paved the way for the media to criticize the government's strategies. "The government has no intention of hitting back at criticisms levelled

against it. On the contrary, it welcomes media criticisms as part of its mission to promote unity," he said.

Pezeshkian, who took office in late July, has made national unity the cornerstone of his government.

Aref urged the Iran newspaper to act as a "reliable advisor to the government" and instill hope among the public, especially in the face of anti-Iran propaganda.

"Through constructive criticisms and advice, media outlets can help the government respond to the people's demands," he added.

Speaking at the event, Minister Salehi underscored that Iran had "never been a mouthpiece for the government" but rather "a questioning media and a two-way road between the state and the people." He also praised the newspaper for its efforts to preserve Iranian identity and safeguard national interests.

Meanwhile, Jaberi Ansari noted that the Iran newspaper was determined to "bridge the gap between the government and the public."