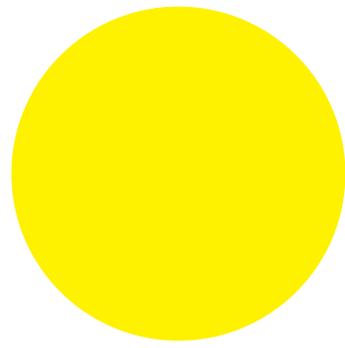


Iran's NDF prioritizing renewable energy, quick-return projects

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# Iran Daily

Vol. 7809 • Thursday, April 17, 2025 • Farvardin 28, 1404 • Shawwal 18, 1446 • 100,000 rials • 8 pages



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## Araghchi: Iran's enrichment program not up for negotiation

President says country's affairs will not await nuclear talks

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### Trump sees Iran talks as his trump card



By Mohammad Jalali  
Iranian lawmaker

**O P I N I O N**  
**E X C L U S I V E**

On Saturday, the first round of negotiations between Iran and the United States was held in Muscat, the capital of Oman, with both sides agreeing to carry on the talks in the weekend. While both parties have talked up the outcome of the initial round, calling it "positive," and similar remarks have been echoed by their respective officials and envoys, it should be emphasized that approaching such negotiations with either blind optimism or knee-jerk pessimism would be misguided. Neither should too much hope be pinned on immediate results, nor should the talks be dismissed as futile from the outset. A more realistic, step-by-step approach—free from preconceived notions—should be adopted, allowing developments to unfold naturally.

That said, a look back at the US track record and its past dealings with the Islamic Republic indicates a consistent pattern of strong-arm tactics and adversarial behavior. Such a hardline stance appears to persist even today. Whether Washington intends to change tack remains to be seen.

Despite all the challenges just outlined, Iran should keep its own interests front and center in any negotiations. While it is true that mutual benefits should be considered in any agreement, if the current talks genuinely serve Iran's national interests and enhance its security, they will certainly be welcomed. Otherwise, alternative means should be employed to stand up to and push back against external threats.

A critical point to note is that the US has only brought up the prospect of negotiations now because it needs them. The fact is US President Donald Trump has since the beginning of his second term, stirred up tensions across the globe by putting forward irrational demands that have rubbed other nations the wrong way. His sudden and sweeping tariffs on imports from most countries have fueled inflation, slowed growth, and even threatened a global economic slump, sending shockwaves through financial markets. This has prompted many nations—even Washington's close allies in Europe—to ponder retaliatory measures.

Trump's bizarre bid to snap up Greenland drew a sharp response from Denmark. His desire to regain control over the Panama Canal, along with his proposal to make Canada the fifty-first state of the US, also raised eyebrows internationally.

Moreover, Trump had promised, before returning to the White House, that he would put an end to the Russia-Ukraine war within 24 hours. Yet, his attempts to do so have clearly hit a wall.

Now, Trump has turned to Iran, hoping to use the negotiations as a feather in his cap—a way to divert attention from the controversies surrounding him and boost his own record. He wants to be seen as the man who brought Iran to the negotiating table after years of resistance and sealed a deal with Tehran. It is clear he does not intend to let this chance slip away.

Trump's past behavior also shows a lack of consistency, making it difficult to pin down how these negotiations might play out. Still, the US fully understands that diplomacy is the most viable path forward, and that military action against Iran would come at a huge cost.

The outcome of these talks will undoubtedly make waves far beyond the region, with the potential to affect the global economy. But above all, what matters most is that Iran pursues its own national interests and security amid today's chaotic international climate. If these negotiations open a door to that goal, they should be continued. If not, it is time to look elsewhere.

## Sandstorm sweeps several provinces across Iran

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A bridge is shrouded in dust in the city of Ahvazi, southwestern Iran, as a dust storm hits several provinces, bringing life to a standstill on April 16, 2025  
IRNA



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# Araghchi: Iran's enrichment program not up for negotiation

President says country's affairs will not await nuclear talks

## International Desk

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on Wednesday that Iran's enrichment of uranium is "non-negotiable" after US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff called for a halt to uranium enrichment ahead of the second round of talks between the two countries in Italy.

"Iran's enrichment [program] is a real, accepted matter. We are ready to build confidence in response to possible concerns, but the issue of enrichment is non-negotiable," Araghchi told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

The remarks came as Araghchi and Witkoff are due to meet again in Rome on Saturday, a week after they held the highest-level talks since US President Donald Trump abandoned a landmark nuclear deal in 2018.

Both sides described Saturday's meeting as "constructive", which was held in Oman.

But on Tuesday, Witkoff said Iran must "stop and eliminate" its enrichment of uranium as part of any nuclear deal. He had previously demanded only that Iran return to the 3.67 percent enrichment ceiling set by the 2015 accord between Iran and major powers that Trump unilaterally withdrew from in 2018.

## Conflicting positions

Araghchi condemned what he called the "contradictory and conflicting positions" coming out of the Trump administration ahead of Saturday's talks. "We will find out the true opinions of the Americans during the negotiation session," he said.

Iran's top diplomat said he hoped to start negotiations on the framework of a possible agreement but said that required "constructive positions" from the United States.

"If we continue to (hear) contradictory

and conflicting positions, we are going to have problems," he warned. On Tuesday, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei cautioned that while the talks have proceeded well in their early stages, they could still prove fruitless. "The negotiations may or may not yield results," he said.

## Moscow visit

Before the second round of talks, Araghchi will deliver a message from Iran's Leader to Russian President Vladimir Putin on a trip to Russia.

Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian in a cabinet meeting on Wednesday said that the negotiations are underway and the country's affairs are proceeding normally, stressing that the country's affairs will not be held up for the outcome of the nuclear talks. However, he said that, "We naturally welcome an agreement."



Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi talks with reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting in Tehran on April 16, 2025.  
● MIZAN

The US president met with his top national security aides on Tuesday to discuss Iran's nuclear program. A source briefed on the meeting said

Trump and his top aides discussed the Iran talks and subsequent steps. US officials have been working on a framework for a potential nuclear deal.

## Iran summons Argentine envoy over 1994 AMIA case accusations

### International Desk

Iran summoned the Argentine chargé d'affaires in Tehran to strongly protest against accusations by the Argentinean judiciary against senior Iranian officials, condemning the provocative move by Buenos Aires as contrary to international norms and regulations. Iran's Foreign Ministry on Tuesday summoned Jorge Mariano Jordan to convey Tehran's strong protest against a ruling by Argentine Prosecutor Sebastián Basso, who issued arrest warrants for several senior Iranian officials in connection with the 1994 AMIA bombing, Press TV reported.

"In response to the unlawful and internationally improper move by the Argentine Prosecutor's Office in leveling allegations against senior officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the chargé d'affaires of Argentina in Tehran was summoned by Issa Kameli, Director General for the Americas at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The chargé d'affaires was delivered the Islamic Republic of Iran's official note of strong protest," the ministry said in a statement on Wednesday.

Back in July 1994, the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) Jewish



center in Buenos Aires was targeted by a bomb attack, in which 85 people were reportedly killed and some 300 others wounded.

The bombing remains unclaimed and unresolved, though Israel has consistently blamed Iran for the attack. Tehran has rejected the allegation on numerous occasions through the past three decades.

During the meeting, Kameli conveyed the Islamic Republic's "categorical rejection and condemnation of the unfounded accusations" made by the Argentine judiciary and official authorities.

He emphasized that the decision by

the AMIA case prosecutor to level accusations against senior officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran "constitutes yet another deviation in the protracted judicial proceedings related to a suspicious incident dating back to 1994." The decision to blame Iran "only serves to deepen the numerous unanswered questions and ambiguities surrounding the case—ambiguities that have persisted due to the continuous interference and influence of individuals affiliated with the Zionist regime, which has turned the case into a political instrument for advancing that regime's anti-Iranian agenda," he added.

## Sandstorm sweeps several provinces across Iran

### National Desk

A sandstorm has severely impacted several western and southwestern Iranian provinces, reducing air quality and leading to the closure of schools, universities and public offices as well as the suspension of incoming and outgoing flights.

The air quality levels saw an alarming drop in many cities in the provinces.

The sandstorm emanating from the neighboring Iraq and Saudi Arabia hit the provinces of Khuzestan, Ilam, Kermanshah, Bushehr, Lorestan, Hormozgan and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad.

The sandstorm blanketed the provinces in an orange cloud as shown in footage and images shared by the Iranian news agencies and reduced visibility in the areas.

People in the cities wore face masks to protect themselves from the dust.

The authorities were forced to shut down schools, universities and public offices and suspend flights in the southern province of Bushehr.

The authorities have called on people, especially those with cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, to avoid unnecessary

outdoor activities due to the significant decrease in air quality.

Drivers were forced to turn on their cars' lights in the daytime as the sand storm reduced visibility in the Qeshm island in the southern province of Hormozgan.

In Khuzestan Province, air pollution in many cities reached dangerous levels, schools and public offices were closed, flights were called off.

Hundreds of people were also taken to medical centers with respiratory and cardiac symptoms.

In the neighboring Iraq, a severe sandstorm also swept across the center and south of the Arab country, turning the sky a strange orange, reducing visibility in some places to less than a half mile and sending several thousand people to emergency rooms with respiratory problems.

As a result of its hot and arid climate, the West Asia region has always been battered by dust and sandstorms, but they have become relatively more frequent and intense in recent years. Most sandstorms hitting Iran originate from the neighboring countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Syria.

## Russia's Federation Council okays strategic partnership deal with Iran

### International Desk

The Russian Federation Council ratified the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between Russia and Iran, solidifying a long-term alliance between the two countries across key sectors, including defense, energy, and technology.

It came weeks after Russia's lower house of parliament had ratified the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty with Iran, marking a significant step in the expansion of political and economic relations between Moscow and Tehran. The treaty was signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in Moscow in January. Putin submitted it to the State Duma in March.

Russian leader called it a "breakthrough document," and the Iranian president

said it would "open a new chapter in relations between Iran and Russia in all fields."

It provides the legal framework for the long-term development of cooperation in areas ranging from defense, energy, finances, and transportation to industries, agriculture, culture, science, and technology. Based on the treaty, Russia and Iran are committed to helping each other counter common "security threats" and exchange intelligence in that direction. The agreement also stipulates that if either side is subjected to aggression, the other will not provide "assistance to the aggressor."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko said in an address to the State Duma, "The signing of the treaty does not mean the establishment of a military alliance with Iran or mutual military assistance."

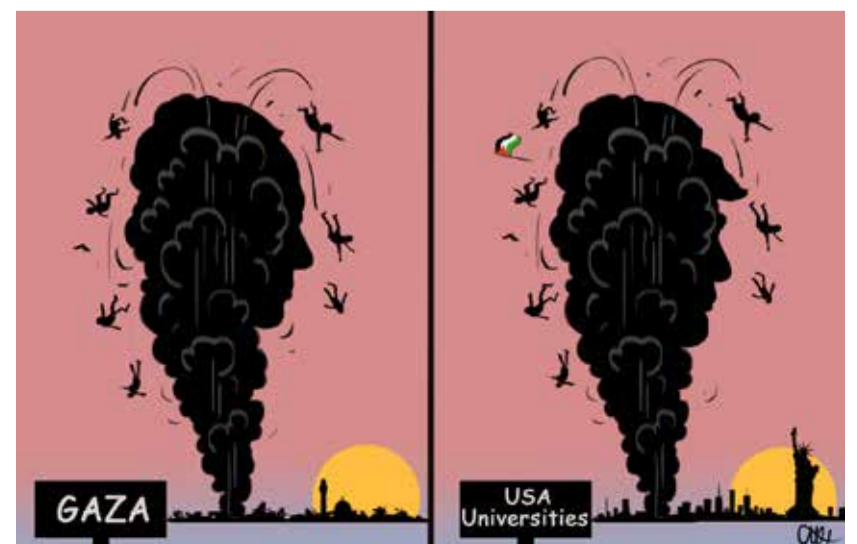
The Russia-Iran treaty promotes investment in oil and gas development, joint long-term projects in peaceful nuclear energy, and the creation of a payment system independent of third countries, which uses national currencies.

State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin said earlier that the treaty would strengthen relations in terms of both bilateral cooperation and coordination on international issues.

He said the agreement underscores the expansion of inter-parliamentary relations, including within international parliamentary organizations and through the commission on cooperation between the State Duma and the Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran and Russia, as two close and strategic allies, have over the past years deepened their relations in various fields despite heavy Western sanctions.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi  
Cartoonist



# Minister: Tehran eyes halal meat exports from Brazil to Muslim nations



## Economy Desk

Iran's minister of agriculture emphasized the gradual reduction of meat imports from Brazil due to improved domestic production, stressing the strategic use of existing infrastructure in Brazil to re-export red meat under the Iranian Halal brand to Islamic countries.

During his visit to the Iran Halal Center in Sao Paulo while attending the BRICS Agriculture Ministers' Summit, Gholamreza Nouri Qezeljah emphasized the gradual reduction of meat imports from Brazil due to improved domestic production, IRNA reported.

Halal refers to products and practices permissible under Islamic law, particularly re-

garding food and drink prepared in accordance with religious guidelines.

"Given the domestic production improvements and increased red meat imports from neighboring countries — which offer logistical advantages — imports from Brazil may decline," Nouri Qezeljah stated. "However, even after achieving self-sufficiency, we will not abandon the infrastructure established here for halal meat supply. We can re-export red meat under the Iranian Halal brand to Islamic and other interested countries."

The agriculture minister explained that recent red meat imports were largely driven by currency shocks, which disrupted domestic production and necessitated imports

to address shortages. Nouri Qezeljah added, "In recent years, so-called 'source markets' have entered the red meat export arena. Their proximity to Iran, along with cultural and religious familiarity, has simplified logistics. This shift reduces the workload at the Iran Halal Center in Sao Paulo."

"Our current focus is to prioritize imports of frozen meat, particularly veal, from Brazil," he noted.

While acknowledging that red meat imports from Brazil will decrease, the minister affirmed, "The Iran Halal Center in Brazil will continue operations as long as necessary. We will leverage its capacities for trade, re-exports, and providing services to other countries."

## Iran's NDF prioritizing renewable energy, quick-return projects

### Economy Desk

An official of the National Development Fund of Iran (NDF) expressed the organization's preparedness to finance approximately \$23 billion in quick-return projects, export-oriented initiatives, and large-scale projects, including those in the oil, gas, petrochemical, steel, and renewable energy sectors, with the aim of supporting domestic production and realizing the new Persian calendar year's motto — Investment for Production.

The director of supervision and claims collection at the NDF said that in the new Iranian year (began on March 20, 2025) – 1404, the NDF is prepared to finance these projects, all in line with supporting domestic production, as reported by IRNA.

Alireza Banihashemi said that alongside projects in the oil, gas, petrochemical, and steel sectors, renewable energy projects have been prioritized for investment due to existing imbalances in the energy sector.

He highlighted the year's strategic objectives, emphasizing support for production and investment. He confirmed the fund's readiness to provide comprehensive financing for the country's economic initiatives.

In response to the question of whether the \$25 billion figure for project financing in the year 1404 is final, Banihashemi explained, "As repeatedly emphasized, the NDF is a financial institution and does not engage in direct ownership. In fact, the NDF facilitates investment in the country by financing the private sector."

He stated that the NDF's investment priorities for the year 1404 are focused on quick-return and export-oriented projects. "Alongside projects in the oil, gas, petrochemical, and steel sectors, renewable energy projects, especially in the power sector, have been prioritized for investment due to existing imbalances in the energy sector and the presidential directive," he added.

The official further said, "The NDF will soon begin financing one of the

country's largest renewable energy power plant projects. This project is part of the plan to produce 30,000 MW of electricity from renewable sources, with the necessary permits issued and classified and prioritized by relevant task forces."

"Within this framework, any project that has obtained the necessary permit from SATBA (Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Organization) and is introduced to the NDF by the operating bank can enter the financing process," he continued.

Banihashemi also addressed the timeline for the realization of the announced \$25 billion investment, "Naturally, financing this volume of projects will be gradual. Projects will be completed over several years, and we will also use revenue sources and previously freed resources to finance new projects."

"In the current year, approximately \$15 billion is allocated for oil and gas projects, \$3 billion for renewable energy, and \$5 billion for industries such as steel, petrochemicals, and water transfer projects from the Per-



sian Gulf and the Sea of Oman." Banihashemi also discussed the status of semi-completed industrial projects and their need for financing, "The NDF is paying special attention to this category of projects, especially those that have been halted due to

exchange rate fluctuations or implementation issues. If these projects are economically justifiable and have obtained the necessary permits, the NDF is prepared to bring them into the financing cycle to ensure the completion of past investments."

## Unemployment rate fell to 7.6% last year, down from 8.1%

### Economy Desk

Head of Iran's Statistical Center announced the country's overall unemployment rate for the past Iranian calendar year (1403) – began on March 20, 2024 – as 7.6%, while youth unemployment (ages 15–24) stood at 20.1%. This marks a decline from the previous year's (1402) general unemployment rate of 8.1%.

Speaking at the first meeting of the government's Supreme Employment Council in the new year, chaired by President Masoud Pezeshkian, Gholamreza Goudarzi stated, "The economic participation rate for the population aged 15 and older in 1403 was 41%. The government must implement a specialized program in this regard."

He added, "The unemployment rate for young people aged 15 to 24 is significantly higher, reaching 20.1%." During the 86th session of the Supreme Employment Council, participants emphasized the need for "special support for rural employment and prioritization of loans for entrepreneurs working in villages."



## Russian specialists working on Rasht-Astara railway project: Deputy PM

### Economy Desk

Russia's deputy prime minister stated that Russian specialists are currently in Iran and working on the Rasht-Astara railway project.

In response to a question from the TASS news agency about the timeline for constructing the railway, Alexei Overchuk said on Wednesday, "Our specialists are already present in Iran," IRNA reported.

Russia's state media further quoted Kazem Jalali, Iran's ambassador to Moscow, as writing, "The Rasht-Astara railway will be built in less than three to four years."

On February 20, 2024, Russia's Transport Minister announced that the country might begin feasibility studies for the Rasht-Astara railway line under the Moscow-Tehran memorandum of understanding within the next one to two months. "The executive agreement for this railway project is scheduled to be

signed by the end of March 2025. Additionally, an annex agreement was signed between the two countries on February 20, 2024, which allows us to begin our surveys and studies before the Iranian side completes the process of purchasing and securing land along the railway route," Roman Vladimirovich Starovoi told reporters. "The cost of constructing this railway will be determined after completing the studies and route design, but for now, we are still considering approximately the same figure previously announced," Starovoi added.

On May 7, 2023, Russia and Iran signed an agreement to jointly build the Rasht-Astara route. Under this agreement, Moscow will provide Tehran with an intergovernmental loan worth €1.3 billion for the project.

According to Russian sources, the construction cost of the railway is



estimated at €1.6 billion. Earlier, Russia's state-run TASS news agency reported, the Rasht-Astara line is expected to be built with Moscow-Tehran coop-

eration, while the Astara (located in Iran) – Astara (located in Azerbaijan) line will be developed through trilateral cooperation between Moscow, Tehran, and Baku."

# Do talks pave way for beckoning investments in special economic zones?

**ANALYSIS** According to the findings of a study, in addition to obstacles in attracting domestic and foreign capital, “factors such as neglect of real production, the dominance of local and political agendas, shortcomings in the banking and insurance systems, and the absence of development-oriented strategies” are among the reasons for the failure to achieve the objectives of establishing special economic zones (SEZs).

Iran’s economy is now more in need of investment than ever. On the eve of negotiations held on April 12 between Iranian and American delegations in Oman, President Masoud Pezeshkian announced that Iran’s Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei

had not opposed the entry of American investors into the country. Figures as high as \$1 trillion have been cited in this context, and even a partial realization of this amount could trigger significant transformations in the national economy.

However, many argue that the fundamental solution to addressing the country’s needs lies in attracting public and private sector participation and capital.

Special economic zones serve as gateways for attracting investment, supporting domestic production, and developing exports and imports. These zones were specifically established to attract foreign direct investment, facilitate the transfer of modern technologies, and bolster production processes while enhancing

the nation’s export capacity.

According to a 2022 report by the Iranian Parliament Research Center (IPRC), only 30 of the 80 approved zones are operational. The slow, fragmented, and strategy-deficient development of these zones has limited their effectiveness in advancing the country’s development.

Ali Asghar Allameh and colleagues, in an article titled “Pathology of attracting investment in special economic zones,” examined the role and function of these zones in attracting domestic and foreign investment, while also outlining major challenges in this area. Below are key excerpts from the article:

## Brief overview of formation and evolution of SEZs in Iran

The concept of free economic zones in Iran dates back to the 1970s, with Kish Island selected as the first candidate. However, this initiative stalled following the Islamic Revolution and the imposed Iraqi war. During the reconstruction era (late 1980s) under the First Development Plan, the establishment of free zones — such as Kish, Qeshm, and Chabahar — was revived. These zones played a crucial role in reducing import dependency.

In 1990, the Supreme Council of Free Zones was formed to leverage international opportunities. Concurrently, the idea of special economic zones emerged, which, unlike free zones, focused more on supplying industrial inputs. Iran’s first official special economic zone was established in Sirjan in 1992.

In 1995, these zones were renamed “special economic zones,” but their governing legislation was not ratified until 2005. As reported by the Iranian Parliament Research Center (2022), only 30 of the 80 approved zones are active. The sluggish, disjointed, and strategy-absent development process has curtailed their efficacy in Iran’s economic progress.

## Gap between SEZs and successful global models

Iran’s special economic zones were launched in the early 1990s to foster industrial development and attract domestic and foreign investment. Despite localized successes, these zones have largely failed to drive major economic transformations. Globally, such zones have served as effective tools for enhancing competitiveness and advancing economic reforms. In Iran, however, they have primarily been shaped by local and political motives rather than goal-oriented, macro-level strategies.

In Iran, the quantitative expansion of these zones has been treated as a success metric, sidelining necessary structural and institutional reforms. Over 80 zones have been approved since 1996, yet only 30 are operational. This trend reflects governments’ prioritization of quantity over fundamental reforms in economic policies. Moreover, global policymaking has increasingly focused on science and technology parks, trade agreements, and economic unions, diminishing the emphasis on special economic zones.

In Iran, the establishment of these zones has been heavily influenced by regional pressures and localized development goals, resulting in a model



This handout picture provided by Khabar Online on April 12, 2025, shows Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (2nd L) speaking with members of the Iranian delegation on the sidelines of the indirect talks with the US delegation in Muscat, Oman.

● KHABARONLINE

that diverges from successful international benchmarks. This underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive review of policies and implementation approaches to enhance their role in Iran’s economic development.

## Overview of four SEZs under IMIDRO’s purview

In Iran, four special economic zones under the management of the Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO) play a significant role in the country’s industrial and mining development:

### 1. Persian Gulf Mining and Metal Industries Special Economic Zone

Located west of Bandar Abbas, this zone was initially known as the “Mining and Metal Industries Special Zone.” It encompasses steel, aluminum, petrochemical, and mining industries, along with power plants, and spans approximately 4,650 hectares.

2. Parsian Energy Intensive Industrial Special Economic Zone Situated at the border of the southern provinces of Hormozgan, Bushehr, and Fars, this zone aims to reduce the raw export of natural gas and produce high value-added products. Its targets include steel, petrochemicals, aluminum, and electricity production, with an estimated required investment of \$37.4 billion.

### 3. Lamerd Special Economic Zone

Established to develop energy-intensive industries, complete production chains, and boost non-oil exports, Lamerd benefits from its strategic proximity to the South Pars Gas Field and the Persian Gulf.

### 4. Kashan Special Economic Zone

Located near Kashan, this zone focuses on industrial, commercial, and service-sector development, positioning itself as a hub for industrial growth in central Iran.

These zones reflect IMIDRO’s targeted policies to optimize mineral and energy resources while advancing the nation’s industrial infrastructure.

## Challenges in attracting investment to SEZs

Iran’s special economic zones were created to support domestic production, expand non-oil exports, and strengthen regional economies. In the 2010s, with the introduction of economy policies, new expectations emerged — such as transferring advanced technologies, boosting exports, and attracting foreign capital. Success in attracting investment, particularly foreign investment, became a key metric for evaluating these zones and achieving broader goals like production, export growth, and job creation.

However, assessments of their performance between 2013 and 2020 reveal major challenges. A primary issue is the lack of accu-

rate, systematic data at the zone level. Many zones fail to publish sufficient information on investment inflows, industrial activities, or export achievements, and even official institutions face statistical inconsistencies. Furthermore, energy-focused zones dominate economic performance. For instance, the Parsian Energy Intensive Industrial Special Economic Zone and the Pars Special Economic Zone account for a large share of national exports. However, their success stems primarily from Iran’s structural advantages in energy resources, rather than zone-specific policies.

In contrast, zones focused on non-energy industrial and manufacturing sectors attract minimal investment and show limited economic success. This imbalance highlights shortcomings in targeted policymaking, ineffective incentives, and structural challenges like bureaucratic complexity and regulatory instability. Foreign investment trends mirror this pattern: investors gravitate toward zones with natural advantages (e.g., energy resources) rather than those attempting to create new appeal through policy interventions.

## Foreign investment challenges in SEZs

From 2013 to 2020, total foreign investment in Iran’s 17 special economic zones amounted to approximately \$3.7 billion, averaging \$465 million annually.

Around 63% of this investment was concentrated in the Pars and Parsian zones, which operate in energy and petrochemicals.

Among IMIDRO-managed zones, the Parsian Energy-Intensive Industries Zone led with \$2.163 billion, followed by the Persian Gulf Mining and Metal Industries Special Economic Zone (\$754 million) and Lamerd zone (\$372 million). In contrast, the Bushehr Special Economic Zone attracted just \$1 million in foreign investment during this period.

These figures underscore the concentration of foreign capital in zones with structural advantages like energy resources, access to international waters, and port infrastructure. Other zones have struggled to attract significant foreign investment.

The impact of international sanctions, particularly those linked to Iran’s nuclear program, is evident in these trends. The 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) temporarily boosted foreign investment, increasing the share of investment in special zones from 20% in 2012 to 51% in 2017. However, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the reimposition of sanctions caused this share to plummet to 0.5%, triggering a downward spiral.

Such volatility highlights the high risk and economic-political instability deterring foreign investors, despite domestic



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● IRNA

incentives. Regional competitors like the UAE, Oman, and Pakistan attracted over \$26 billion in foreign investment during the same period. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need for policy revisions, improved international relations, and regulatory stability in Iran.

#### Analysis of domestic investment trends in IMIDRO's SEZs

Compared to foreign direct investment, domestic investment in IMIDRO's special economic zones has performed more favorably. Between 2013 and 2020, total domestic investment in these zones reached 106 trillion tomans (approximately \$14.7 billion), peaking in 2020 with over 56 trillion tomans in domestic capital absorption.

Persian Gulf Mining and Metal Industries Special Economic Zone and the Lamerd Special Economic Zone led the way, attracting \$18 billion and \$7.8 billion in domestic investment, respectively, and experiencing significant economic growth.

A substantial portion of growth in these zones stems from domestic resources, as their performance in attracting foreign investment has been lackluster. Factors such as sanctions, infrastructural deficiencies, bureaucratic hurdles, and weak economic governance have hindered foreign capital inflows.

Special economic zones are intended to stimulate foreign investment and promote non-oil export growth. However, due to domestic challenges, these zones have strayed from their primary objectives and have not succeeded in achieving their overarching goals.

#### Factors behind failure to achieve SEZ objectives

An analysis of Iran's special economic zones and their shortcomings in attracting investment and driving economic development reveals structural, policy, and systemic challenges. Key factors include:

1. Overreliance on traditional comparative advantages, neglect of production

A major weakness lies in prioritizing existing comparative advantages over "creating new competitive edges." This approach perpetuates raw-material-focused production and low value-added exports, undermining competitiveness and long-term development.

2. Dominance of local, political agendas in zone establishment

Many zones were established due to political pressures or local demands rather than geographic or economic viability. This has led to zones being located in areas with inadequate infrastructure and limited industrial capacity.

3. Constraints in financial, banking, and insurance systems  
Rigidities and inefficiencies in Iran's

financial and insurance systems have deterred foreign investment. Key issues include underdeveloped financial markets, opaque regulations, and unfavorable tax policies.

4. Lack of strategic vision in SEZ policymaking

The absence of a national strategic roadmap for these zones has rendered them ineffective and costly. Without clear objectives or globally aligned planning, zones fail to deliver meaningful outcomes.

The confrontation of the rentier and ideological structures of governments with the outward-looking development model.

5. Confrontation of rent-seeking and ideological structures with outward-oriented development

A governance model rooted in ideological self-reliance and rent-seeking economic structures has hindered integration into global markets and technological exchange. While SEZ success depends on global engagement, Iran's economic governance framework remains misaligned with these needs.

#### Research findings

- Energy-focused zones like the Persian Gulf Mining and Metal Industries and Parsian zones outperformed others (e.g., Kashan and Lamerd) in attracting domestic and foreign investment.

- Sanctions, neglect of production, preference for local demands over location-specific assessments, and failure to reform banking/insurance systems are primary reasons for underperformance.

- Iran's experience with SEZs aimed at attracting foreign investment, transferring technology, boosting domestic production, and enhancing exports has been marred by challenges. Neglect of real production, politicized zone establishment, banking/insurance inefficiencies, and absence of development strategies have undermined these goals.

- While zones like Parsian and the Persian Gulf succeeded in domestic investment, regions such as Kashan and Lamerd lagged due to infrastructure gaps, poor regional capacity-based planning, and neglect of production/export priorities.

To enhance the effectiveness of special economic zones, implementing multi-layered reforms in both policymaking and execution is crucial. Critical measures include streamlining zone establishment procedures, upgrading infrastructure and regional capabilities, overhauling financial systems and funding frameworks, embracing production-focused strategies, and advancing development-driven foreign policies. A cohesive, sustained strategy across these areas is vital to fully realize these zones' capacity to propel Iran's industrial, commercial, and economic progress.

The article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.

# Muscat negotiations, a pragmatic diplomatic achievement



By Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh  
International Affairs Expert

## OPINION

The most significant outcome of the Muscat negotiations, nevertheless, was the demonstration of diplomatic pragmatism — an achievement not to be underestimated. This is because anti-negotiation factions in both Iran and the US have long argued that the two sides used talks as a pretext, claiming each pursued alternative agendas. On the American side, critics alleged that the US, amid military posturing, sought only to offer limited negotiation opportunities while aligning primarily

by sidelining intermediaries and pushing for direct US-Iran negotiations. Should this scenario materialize, Iran has signaled openness. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has stated, "We have no ideological opposition to economic cooperation with the US."

In contrast, Scenario Two involves Trump prioritizing the demands of actors like Israel, potentially introducing non-negotiable terms. For instance, the US might demand Iran abandon its nuclear fuel cycle while retaining facilities like the Bushehr reactor, relying instead on externally supplied fuel under pre-JCPOA arrangements (e.g., 20%-enriched uranium monitored by the IAEA). Such terms would effectively strip Iran of fuel production capabilities, leading to

part from decades of hardline resistance, which has historically hindered US-Iran de-escalation. In Iran, the debate over direct versus indirect talks is shaped by hardline pressures, a dynamic that has exacted a heavy toll on the country. It is argued that there is no justification for persisting with indirect negotiations or intermediaries, particularly now that US willingness for dialogue is evident. Those advocating indirect talks or limiting negotiation mandates are seen as seeking to create loopholes to sabotage the process.

Regarding Russia's role in the negotiations between Iran and the United States, it is no secret that Russia is striving to make the Ukraine issue the top priority on



with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policies against Iran. Conversely, some in Iran argued that the country was not genuinely pursuing dialogue but rather engaging in stalling tactics.

The fact that both sides agreed to structure the talks in a way that avoided deadlock and set a timeline for further rounds indicates a mutual desire for agreement. When rival parties seek compromise, they intentionally frame negotiation texts or agendas to emphasize common ground while deferring contentious issues — a dynamic observed in Muscat. This week is viewed as a critical juncture for diplomacy, particularly as anti-negotiation forces in Iran and elsewhere continue their efforts to undermine progress.

Looking ahead, two potential scenarios emerge. Scenario One envisions Iran and the US reaching a JCPOA-like agreement during the Trump administration. This possibility was previously floated, as some argued that Trump dismantled the original JCPOA for two reasons: first, to affix his own signature to a new deal, and second, to secure economic benefits

failed talks. Worse still, additional non-nuclear disputes could be injected into the agenda. The likelihood of agreement hinges on how closely the parties align with each other's scenarios.

It is argued that the regional welcome for these talks, excluding Israel, sends a clear message to the US about the Middle East's desire for stability. The US' largest economic exchanges occur in this region, a reality absent during the JCPOA era. This shift bolsters the prospects for dialogue. However, it is emphasized that without breaking taboos, negotiations risk yielding outcomes favoring Netanyahu. Greater incentives, economic prospects, and regional security cooperation between Iran and the U.S. would enhance the chances of agreement. Shared interests in economic collaboration and regional security could not only bridge bilateral tensions but also align with the interests of neighboring states. Such progress, it is asserted, requires bold steps.

Domestically, criticism from some Iranian lawmakers against continued negotiations stems in

the US agenda. However, the reality is that Russia is so deeply involved in the Ukraine conflict that it lacks the capacity to be proactive in diplomatic initiatives around the world. This has been the case for the past four years, and unfortunately, if the negotiators and officials of Iran had revived the JCPOA four years ago, Iran would have achieved unprecedented gains. But currently, the exclusion of Russia from nuclear talks is viewed as a US-driven decision, not an Iranian one.

Meanwhile, Russia's efforts to prioritize the Ukraine issue in US foreign policy are no secret. However, its deep entanglement in the Ukraine war has reportedly diminished its capacity to disrupt global diplomatic initiatives. It is suggested that had Iranian negotiators and officials revived the JCPOA four years ago, Iran would have achieved unprecedented gains. Currently, the exclusion of Russia from nuclear talks is viewed as a US-driven decision, not an Iranian one.

The article first appeared on the Persian service of ILNA.

# Iran's Maqsoudlou crowned at Reykjavik Open



## Sports Desk

Iranian chess grandmaster Parham Maqsoudlou was crowned champion at the Reykjavik Open 2025 in Iceland.

World No. 42 Maqsoudlou shared the spoils with Indian grandmaster Abhijeet Gupta in the ninth and the final round on Tuesday to finish atop

the table with 7.5 points – thanks to six wins and two draws after nine rounds of matches. Ukraine's Vasyil Ivanchuk, Azerbaijan's Mohammad Muradli, and Serbian Velimir Ivic stood behind the Iranian, respectively, with the runner-up to 11th-placed players finishing on seven points.

The Iranian began his

campaign with a victory over German Georg Tscheuschner, and went on to beat British FIDE master Sohum Lohia, Lukasz Licznanski of Poland, American Brandon Jacobson, Azerbaijani GM Muradli, and Shreyas Royal of England, while settling for a draw against Ukrainian Ivanchuk.

The Iranian was not

paired with any opponent in the fourth round. The latest triumph took Maqsoudlou's FIDE rating to 2684 points. More than 200 players from 52 countries took part at the seven-day event.

This was the 39th edition of the chess tournament in the capital of Iceland.

# FIBA Women's Asia Cup Div. B qualifiers: Iranian girls off to flyer against Syria



## Sports Desk

Iran got off to flying start at the FIBA Women's Asia Cup Div. B – WABA Qualification Tournament, defeating Syria 65-55 in the Group A opener in Amman, Jordan.

Iranian guard Roxy Barahman, who plays for French club Tarbes Gespe Bigorre, contrib-

uted with a game-high 25 points – including five 3-pointers – and seven rebounds in 31 minutes of play for the country, with Delaram Vakili chipping in 14 points, 12 of which came from behind the arc.

Bervin Jajo (13pts) and Alicia Magarian (11) finished in double figures for Syria.

Iranian girls won the first quarter 23-12, before it finished 38-26 at half-time.

Iran again dominated the third quarter for a 19-7 advantage, as the Syrians' fightback in the final quarter proved too little, too late.

Next for Iran in the three-team group is a game against Jordan today.

## Asian U18 Athletics Championships:

# Iran's Ahanin-Maram wins bronze in boys' hammer throw

## Sports Desk

Iranian Amirreza Ahanin-Maram won a first medal for the country at the Asian U18 Athletics Championships, grabbing a bronze medal in the boys' hammer throw event on Day 1 of the contests in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian began the final showpiece with a 67.74m effort, and then went on to register 69.88m, before his final

attempt of 70.83m saw Ahanin-Maram finish on the third podium.

The host's Mohammed Siraj Alzayer walked away with the gold medal thanks to a 79.11m attempt, with Chinese Wang Ankang settling for the silver with 74.81m.

The sixth edition of the competition will continue until Friday in the Saudi coastal city.

Kiarash Kaboli, Arman Amini, Amirreza Moradi,

Mohammad-Hassan Darvish, and Mohammad-Saleh Kamareh are the other Iranians in the men's competition, with Umm ul-Banin Tehrani, Hasti Siahmansouri, and Samia Shahpari taking part in the women's events.

Elsewhere on Day 1, Siahmansouri finished fourth in the hammer throw final with 56.14m, while Tehrani also missed out on the shot put event, standing fourth with 14.44m.



iranathletics.ir



# Iranian Qassemi named Saudi FS wrestling head coach

## Sports Desk

Former Iranian super-heavyweight wrestler Komeil Qassemi was appointed as the new head coach of Saudi Arabia freestyle national team. This is a second coaching job overseas for the two-time Olympic medalist, who led the

Cambodia to an all-time best haul of 19 medals – three golds and silvers apiece – at the 2022 Southeast Asian Wrestling Championships.

Qassemi, who is also a United World Wrestling (UWW) educator, retired from wrestling in 2019, with a 2014

world silver, as well as a gold medal and double silvers at the Asian Championships under his belt.

Qassemi won the freestyle 120kg bronze at the 2012 London Olympics, before his medal was upgraded to the gold seven years later, when the two

original finalists Artur Taymazov and Davit Modzmanashvili were stripped of their medals after testing positive for banned substances.

Qassemi settled for a superheavyweight silver in Rio 2016, following a final defeat against Turkish great Taha Akgül.

UWW

# Importance of dinosaur footprint discoveries in Kerman Province

## Iranica Desk

Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization of Zarand, a city in Kerman Province, recently visited the newly discovered dinosaur footprints in Dasht-e Khak Village, accompanied by the heads of universities in Zarand.

During this visit, he articulated that the primary purpose was to assess the significance of this discovery in relation to tourism and the protection of natural heritage. Eslami emphasized the potential of this discovery to attract tourists, noting that these dinosaur footprints are not only valuable historical and scientific artifacts but could also become a unique tourist attraction.

He added that the existence of such evidence of dinosaurs could promote scientific and specialized tourism, providing an opportunity for a better understanding of geological and environmental history. Eslami indicated that necessary measures for the protection of this



virgool.io

footprint, as well as the creation of suitable conditions for its tourism development, would commence soon, ISNA wrote. Samin Mirzaei, the head of the Islamic Azad University of Zarand, stressed the importance of education and research in paleontology. She mentioned that this discovery could offer more opportunities for students and

researchers to conduct studies and will be effective in fostering educational programs in this field.

Local officials and stakeholders were also present during the visit, engaging in discussions about planning educational and scientific tours in the region. They specifically emphasized the need to create suitable infrastructure

to facilitate visits from tourists and scientific experts.

This valuable discovery, beyond its scientific aspects, is regarded as an opportunity for sustainable tourism development in Zarand, which could contribute significantly to job creation and economic growth in the region. Dinosaur exploration operations took place in late summer

2002, when a joint Iranian and Brazilian team identified skeletal remains of dinosaurs, including a carnivorous theropod tooth and pieces of unidentified bones, in the Darreh-ye Neyzar area, located in the village of Deh Alireza in northern Zarand, Kerman.

Additionally, an herbivorous dinosaur footprint, angled and

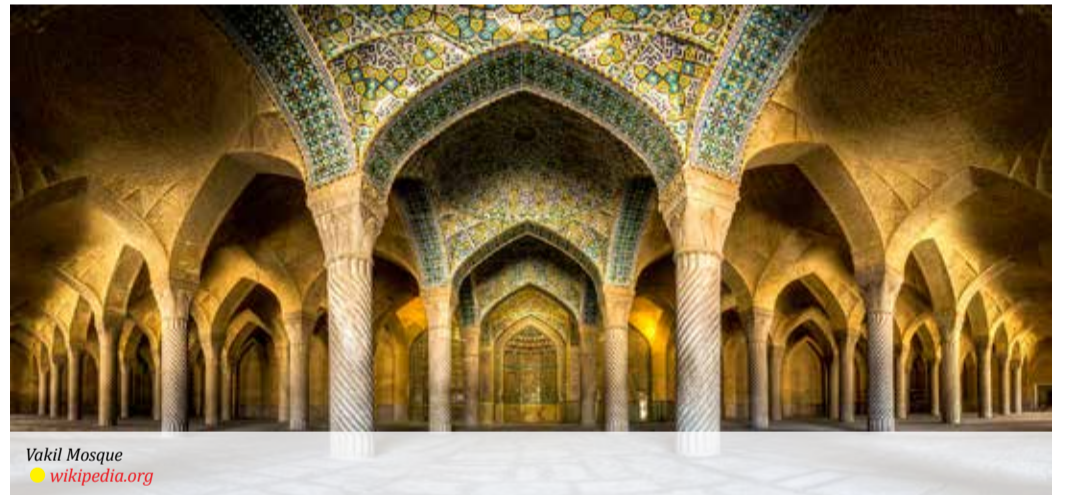
located on a sloping wall, was uncovered in recent excavations. Part of this dinosaur's footprint, which lived approximately 180 million years ago during the Jurassic period, has been lost due to neglect.

These significant discoveries have confirmed that both herbivorous and carnivorous dinosaurs coexisted in Iran.

## A walking tour of Shiraz's historic Zand quarter



Karim Khan Citadel  
charkhemina.ir



Vakil Mosque  
wikipedia.org



Pars Museum  
aftabtravel.com



Vakil Bathhouse  
kojaro.com



Vakil Bazaar  
safartop.com

## Iranica Desk

Shiraz, often referred to as Iran's cultural capital, is best explored on foot — especially in its historic Zand Quarter. Built in the 18th century under the visionary rule of Karim Khan Zand, this district seamlessly blends Persian artistry, architectural marvels, and vibrant living history. This half-day walking tour covers six iconic sites and concludes with a taste of authentic Persian cuisine. Let's step back in time!

### Why Shiraz is a must-visit

Shiraz isn't just a city; it's a portal to the soul of Persia. Beyond its poetic legacy, it serves as the gateway to both Persepolis, the awe-inspiring Achaemenid capital, and Pasargadae, the tomb of Cyrus the Great. Both are UNESCO World Heritage Sites located

just an hour away, destination-iran.com wrote.

The city boasts landmarks like the 19th-century Nasir al-Mulk Mosque, where sunlight transforms stained-glass windows into kaleidoscopes of color. Shiraz's temperate climate nurtures vineyards and fragrant orange groves that frame its stunning turquoise-domed shrines. Its cosmopolitan spirit pulses through art galleries, saffron-infused cuisine, and the warm, tea-loving locals who embody Persian hospitality. A journey here isn't just travel; it's time travel.

### Karim Khan Citadel

Karim Khan Zand, who ruled Iran from 1751 to 1779, rejected the title of king in favor of Vakil-o-Roaya (Attorney of the People). His citadel served both as a military stronghold and a royal

residence. Karim Khan Citadel is a rectangular brick fortress with 14-meter-high walls and circular bastions at each corner.

**Rostam tilework:** The eastern entrance features glazed tiles depicting Rostam, the legendary hero from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, battling demons.

**Inner oasis:** Inside the citadel, a serene courtyard filled with orange trees, private bathhouses (visit the southeast section), and four residential wings showcase the lifestyle of the Zand royal family.

### Pars Museum

Located in Nazar Garden, just a five-minute walk south of the citadel, this octagonal Kolah Farangi (pavilion) building, named for its European-influenced design, once hosted Karim Khan's diplomatic meetings. Today, it houses:

- Exquisite Holy Qur'an manuscripts
- Lacquer-work boxes from the Qajar era
- Portraits of Zand rulers and Safavid-era ceramics
- Design Details:** Admire the intricate muqarnas (honeycomb vaulting) and floral tilework framing the central dome.

### Vakil Mosque

Just a 10-minute walk east from Nazar Garden, near Vakil Bazaar, this mosque greets visitors with its colorful display of striking glazed tiles adorned with beautiful floral patterns. Crossing a wide-open courtyard, enter the southern Shabestan, where a columned hall is concealed behind its tall entrance portal.

**Courtyard:** Framed by 48 tiled arches and featuring a reflective pool.

**Prayer hall:** Supported by 48 spiraled columns, the vaulted ceiling is adorned with intricate arabesque patterns.

**Mihrab and minbar:** The prayer niche and pulpit showcase calligraphic inscriptions and peacock motifs. The mosque's name, Vakil echoes Karim Khan's self-chosen title.

### Vakil Bathhouse

A three-minute walk west of Vakil Mosque leads to this former public bathhouse, now a museum showcasing:

- Wax figures reenacting traditional bathing rituals
- Architectural innovations like Khanu (underground heating)
- Temporary exhibitions (e.g., Persian carpets)

**Design note:** The bathhouse's arched ceilings amplify sound — a feature that ensured privacy

during its heyday.

### Vakil Bazaar and Sara-ye Moshir

No tour of Shiraz is complete without diving into its iconic bazaar! From the Pars Museum, head east to the main entrance, a short walk to two gateways:

**Southern gate:** Follow your nose to vibrant spice stalls and kaleidoscopic shops beneath soaring 17th-century arches. Don't miss the Chaharsu, a domed crossroads where passageways lead to workshops and glittering fabric stores, sourcing materials for the iconic embroidered dresses of the Qashqai nomads.

**Northern gate:** Peek into everyday life at stalls brimming with household goods — perfect for authentic souvenirs and people-watching.

# Tehran to host first UN forum on urban tourism in 2025

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian capital will host the first-ever UN Tourism Global Forum on Urban Tourism in June 2025, following a formal agreement signed in Jakarta on the sidelines of a key regional summit. The memorandum was signed Wednesday by Iran's Deputy Minister of Tourism,

Anoushirvan Mohseni Bandpey, and UN Tourism Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili, IRNA reported. The signing took place during the 37th meeting of the UN Tourism East Asia-Pacific and South Asia Commissions (CAP/CSA), held in Indonesia's capital. The event, scheduled for June 24-25, 2025, will take place

in Tehran. It will be hosted by the Abbas Abad Renovation Company, a UN Tourism affiliate linked to the Tehran municipality. The secretary-general called urban tourism a "key driver" of economic growth and improved city living, while acknowledging Iran's cultural wealth and historic potential. He praised Iran's investments

in infrastructure, services, and city-level tourism development, with particular appreciation for the efforts of the Abbas Abad district. Tehran's selection is viewed as part of a broader push by Iranian authorities and local partners to position the capital — and other cities — more firmly on the global tourism map.



Iran's Deputy Minister of Tourism, Anoushirvan Mohseni Bandpey (L), and UN Tourism Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili sign a cooperation agreement in Jakarta on the sidelines of 37th meeting of the UN Tourism East Asia-Pacific and South Asia Commissions on April 16, 2025. ● IRNA

# ECO cultural leader calls for regional unity through shared heritage

## Arts & Culture Desk



The president of the ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) underscored the importance of shared regional identity and cultural legacy during his visit to Tehran's Milad Tower, signaling stronger cultural ties across the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) member states. Saad S. Khan, a historian by training and a staunch advocate of heritage preservation, praised Iran's modern architectural achievements and the cultural vitality of the capital, IRNA reported.

Touring the panoramic observation decks and cultural exhibitions at the iconic tower, he lauded the site as a symbol of Iran's "rich heritage" and its integration with contemporary development. Khan offered "warm congratulations" on the occasion of Nowruz and expressed hope for lasting "solidarity and prosperity" across the ECO region. His visit, marked by gestures of goodwill and mutual respect, highlighted ECI's commitment to fostering unity through cultural diplomacy. The ECO, a regional intergovernmental organization, aims to enhance

sustainable economic development and promote trade cooperation among its 10 member states, including Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, and several Central Asian and Caucasus countries. The group originated in 1962 under the name RCD (Regional Cooperation for Development) and was later rebranded as ECO in 1985 following a hiatus after Iran's 1979 revolution. ECO now represents a bloc of over 480 million people across a vast territory of more than 8.6 million square kilometers. It holds significant reserves of oil, gas, and indus-

trial potential. Alongside its economic agenda, ECO pursues joint programs in human resource development, transport connectivity, and regional integration. The organization's charter also outlines goals to gradually eliminate trade barriers and support infrastructural growth. Headquartered in Tehran, ECO continues to use English as its official working language. December 7 has been designated ECO Day, commemorating the expansion of the bloc in 1992 with the inclusion of newly independent post-Soviet states.

# Young artists turn dreams into hope for children with cancer

By Saeideh Ehsani Rad  
Staff writer

In an 18-year-old tradition that blends art with charity, the Tara Behbahani Academy will host its annual painting exhibition 'Dream to Reality' on April 17 and 18, featuring 69 young artists between the ages of 6 and 20. Proceeds from the event support children battling cancer at Mahak Pediatric Cancer Treatment and Research Center. Since 2006, Behbahani—an artist and art educator—has gathered her students each spring to share what she calls their "visual dreams," painted with oil, watercolor, acrylic, and collage. "Every year, we paint what we imagine. But we also help those who are living a different kind of reality," she said. The tradition began at age 23, when Behbahani held the first exhibition

with 16 students at Shirin Gallery. The theme was shoes, and the sales funded over 1,000 pairs sent to remote regions in Khorasan and western border towns. As her student base grew, so did the scope of the project. The second and third exhibitions supported the Behnam Daheshpour Charity Organization. Soon after, the collaboration with Mahak began and continues to this day. All exhibition proceeds go directly to Mahak, and the event is held inside the hospital to raise awareness. "Children who visit the show—often the same age as the young patients—come face to face with the realities of illness," Behbahani noted. "It's more than charity; it's about understanding, empathy." This year's theme, 'Dream to Reality,' explores how imagination can shift perception—and sometimes, lives. "We choose the theme each September, and I talk with the students about

in depth," she said. "They each bring their interpretation to canvas. It's not copying—it's creating. Everything comes from their own thoughts and feelings." For Behbahani, fostering creativity has always been central, particularly as a tool for emotional resilience. "During puberty, kids are full of pressure and change. Painting helps them channel it. It teaches them balance." She's also candid about the challenges. Over two decades, only about 50 out of 850 students have been boys. "Families don't prioritize art for their sons—especially not painting," she said. "They see it as impractical." Still, she's seen her male students go on to fields like architecture and jewelry design, where their skills flourished.



Some buyers intentionally leave their purchase behind, allowing the same painting to be resold. "Sometimes a single piece sells multiple times. That wasn't my idea—it came from the public. But it became a miracle," she said. Everything from designing posters to transporting paintings is done by Behbahani herself. "For 18 years, this has been entirely self-run. No sponsors. No external help. Just me—and the kids." The event has had a lasting effect on her students. "Some are abroad now, but they still message me every year," she said. "They remember what it felt like to be part of this. They're proud of it. Some say the certificate they received from Mahak changed how they saw their own abilities."

Each opening ceremony includes a formal thank-you from Mahak. The children are recognized, their efforts validated. "It makes them feel seen," she said. "They realize their art has value—emotional and economic." Behbahani hopes to expand the exhibition nationwide, but says she can't do it alone. "I've been battling cancer myself for the past few years. If this project is to grow, it needs a committee, a proper structure," she said. "The potential is there—but so is the weight." Still, she remains hopeful that more people will step up—not just for Mahak's children, but for others with chronic or rare illnesses. "There are enough venues and enough kind people. Sometimes they just need a little push."



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