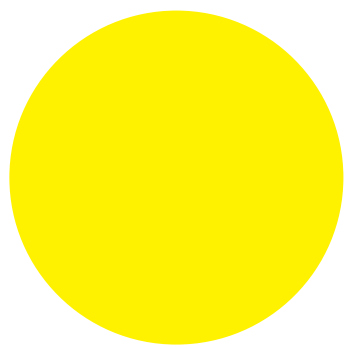


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## Iran should use diplomatic, trade tools to secure water rights from Taliban



By **Abdol-Mohammad Taheri**  
Afghanistan affairs analyst

**OPINION EXCLUSIVE**

A senior Iranian water official has said Afghanistan delivered only a fraction of Iran's legally agreed share of water during the last water year. According to Isa Bozorgzadeh, spokesperson for Iran's water industry, just 119 million cubic meters reached Iran—around 16% of the 820 million cubic meters set out in the 1973 treaty. If the current situation continues and Afghanistan fails to release Iran's allocated water, there is no need for military con-

frontation as Iran maintains channels of engagement with all neighboring countries. The Islamic Republic can apply pressure through active diplomacy as well as the various tools already at its disposal to bring Afghanistan to the table and ensure Iran's rightful share is met. Legal options also remain open. Iran can certainly make use of international mechanisms, including conventions governing transboundary water, with the United Nations acting as the final authority should the dispute be taken that far. The Taliban's failure to release Iran's water share would create serious challenges along the country's eastern borders. There is debate over whether Afghan-

istan's lack of cooperation is deliberate or the result of administrative shortcomings. I believe that both possibilities exist, though ignorance plays a greater role because Afghan authorities would avoid playing with a capable neighbor or push Iran toward a tense path if they applied sound judgement. Diplomatic prudence is among the strongest tools available for Iran to make clear to Afghan authorities that such behavior is not a viable approach to governance. Afghanistan's ability to maintain peaceful relations with Iran—a neighbor with nearly 1,000 kilometers of shared border and significant linguistic, cultural and ideological commonalities—is crucial. If Afghan authorities cannot sustain cultur-

al and economic ties at a time of growing global polarization, and if they fail to release Iran's rightful share of water, they will ultimately risk creating serious problems for themselves. Available evidence is sufficient to conclude that Afghanistan provides perhaps 10% of Iran's water rights—an amount deemed wholly inadequate. The recommendation is that Iran should make use of all mechanisms at its disposal including economic levers related to transit as well as visa requests, which remain in high demand among Afghan citizens seeking to enter Iran for family visits. Iran's extensive trade with Afghanistan is an additional avenue for mounting such pressure.

These tools should be utilized collectively to address a situation that is worsening by the moment, at a time when Iran has suffered years of drought. Afghanistan, by contrast, enjoys better water conditions due to water sources flowing from the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush around Badakhshan province and beyond. For this reason, Taliban officials should honor the joint convention and deliver Iran's water rights. Failure to do so will generate difficulties for both countries, with Afghanistan likely to face the greater consequences. It is hoped that Afghanistan's esteemed and honorable officials will come to their senses, exercise wisdom and promptly resolve the dispute.



# Veep calls on SCO to spur regional economic convergence

## International Desk

Iran's first vice president said on Tuesday that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) should turn into one of the driving forces of economic convergence across the region owing to its great capacities. "The great human capacities, rich natural resources, strategic geographical position, and developing infrastructure among the members of this organization have provided us with exceptional opportunities to expand cooperation," Mohammad Reza Aref told the 24<sup>th</sup> meeting of the SCO Prime Ministers in the Russian capital, Moscow. "We need collective resilience in the face of future shocks; shocks such as energy insecurity, food insecurity, climate change, threats arising from new technologies, and the growing risks posed by monopoly and the existing dominance within global financial and monetary systems,

which cannot be ignored."

Given the current situation, the SCO member states need a collective move toward "inter-twined economy" and the formation of "resilient national and regional economies."

Referring to the previous meeting of the SCO member states, which was held in Chinese city of Tianjin from August 31 to September 1, the Iranian official said the drafting of the SCO's ten-year development strategy, the roadmap for cooperation in the energy sector, and the issuance of numerous statements in various areas are among the important achievements of the Tianjin Summit.

Aref added that Iran is ready to play an active role in implementing the decisions of the Tianjin Summit and in achieving the goals of the organization. He also called the active role of the private sector one of the key factors in the success of the Shanghai Cooperation Organi-



Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref speaks in the 24th meeting of the SCO Prime Ministers in the Russian capital, Moscow, on November 18, 2025.

● [fvpresident.ir](http://fvpresident.ir)

zation which comprises Iran, Russia, Belarus, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Aref said that Iran emphasizes the expansion of the activities of the SCO Business Council and the Interbank Consortium, as well as strengthening their operational functions and their connection with joint economic and industrial projects.

The Business Council can become an important platform for expanding direct connections between the private sectors, developing trade and investment in the member countries, and facilitating the implementation of joint projects, especially in the areas of digitalization, artificial intelligence, and green technol-



ogies, Aref said.

The SCO covers about 24% of the world's land area and 42% of the global population. Mem-

ber states account for roughly one quarter of global GDP, with total trade increasing nearly 100-fold in the past two de-

CADES.

It is the world's largest regional organization in terms of geographic scope and population.

## Iran cannot enter doomed-to-fail nuclear negotiations:

### Deputy FM to CNN

## International Desk

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Khatibzadeh said Iran cannot enter a nuclear negotiation that is doomed to failure and ultimately becomes a pretext for another war.

He made the remarks in response to a question about possible resumption of nuclear talks with the United States in an exclusive interview with CNN.

Khatibzadeh said that if the US accepts the logic of negotiation and abandons some of its illusions and stops its plot to use political-diplomatic tools to achieve what it failed to through a military campaign, "then we can proceed within the framework of the directives of the Leader."

Any future dialogue with the US over Iran's nuclear program would be contingent on an agreement that would allow Iran to pursue uranium enrichment, he underlined.

"Delusions of zero enrichment inside Iran or trying to deprive Iran from its basic rights is not going to be an option for Iran."

Iran and the United States held five rounds of negotiations through Omani mediators before Israel launched a 12-day aggression against the country on June 13.



Saeed Khatibzadeh  
● [CNN](http://CNN)

US President Donald Trump's decision to join Israel in striking Iranian nuclear facilities effectively ended the talks which were set to resume on June 15. The aggression claimed the lives of more than 1,000 Iranians, most of them civilians.

Separately, Khatibzadeh said Iran has "legitimate military programs to defend our national interests and our national security." Asked by CNN if Tehran is expanding its missile program, he said the program was going through "repair and recovery" following the Israel's aggression against Iran in June. Khatibzadeh also described his country's nuclear program as still "intact" despite the damage caused by US and Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities including Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan.

Trump initially claimed that For-

dow had been obliterated. An early US intelligence assessment suggested that the three nuclear facilities had been badly damaged, but Iran's nuclear program may have only been set back by up to two years.

While Khatibzadeh said that Israeli and US strikes had "ruined many of our infrastructure, machineries" and "buildings," he noted that the nuclear program was "very much based on our indigenous knowledge, very much spread across our country, which is a huge country – 90 million people."

"And this country is not a country that you can bomb and then think that you are going to ruin everything," the minister said.

Khatibzadeh's assessment comes as Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said Sunday that no uranium enrichment was taking place "right now" because the country's enrichment facilities had been "attacked." The enrichment process produces fuel for nuclear power plants.

Asked if he had a message to the Trump administration regarding its relationship with Iran, the deputy minister said his country is the "oldest living, continuous civilization on earth... This country and this nation are (a) master of survival."

and prosperity.

China is Iran's largest trade partner. Relations between the two countries have been expanding in recent years due to the Islamic republic's "Look to the East policy" policy. Their relations have further strengthened following the West's pressure on Iran over its nuclear program.

Back in 2021, Tehran and Beijing signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement to reinforce their long-standing economic and political alliance. Both states are subject to different levels of illegal sanctions imposed by the United States.

## Iran has never sought to make nukes:

### Pezeshkian

## International Desk

President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Tuesday that Iran had never pursued to develop nuclear weapons, stressing that the country's nuclear program solely aimed to meet the needs of the nation in the fields of health, medicine, industry, agriculture, science, and technology.

"Some countries, through baseless and false claims and extensive propaganda, have attempted to misrepresent Iran's peaceful nuclear activities while the Islamic Republic of Iran has never sought to produce nuclear weapons," Pezeshkian said as he met new Austrian Ambassador to Tehran Friedrich Stift, who delivered his credentials to the president, IRNA reported.

Pezeshkian took a swipe at what he called "country's ill-wishers" for trying to disrupt the path of Iran's "positive interactions" with the international community since the day he assumed office in August 2024.

He noted that cooperation and the development of ties with all countries, based on friendship, peace, and mutual interests, were the cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy. Iran's nuclear program has been a source of contention with Western countries for more than two decades. While Iran insists that its nuclear activities are entirely peaceful and aimed at civilian purposes such as energy production and medical research, Western powers, the United States, Britain, France,



Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian (R) meets new Austrian Ambassador to Tehran Friedrich Stift (L) in Tehran on November 18, 2025.

● [president.ir](http://president.ir)

and Germany, have long expressed concern that Tehran could be seeking the capability to develop nuclear weapons.

The Austrian envoy said that Vienna had always emphasized resolving issues through dialogue, interaction, and diplomacy, adding that his country was ready to support diplomatic processes.

"Austria has always been ready to host negotiations and facilitate the path of dialogue. We hope the coming years for the world — especially for the country and people of Iran — will be filled with stability, tranquility, peace, and progress."

Iranian president also held separate meetings with new ambassadors of Oman, the UAE and Ghana.

## China says aims to deepen long-term strategic partnership with Iran

## International Desk

Chinese Ambassador to Iran Cong Peiwu said Beijing seeks to deepen cooperation with Iran and steadily advance the China-Iran comprehensive strategic partnership for the long term.

The year 2026 marks the beginning of China's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and also the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Iran, the Chinese ambassador said in an article published by IRNA.

He said that China is willing to work together with the Iranian side to enhance cooperation in the exchange of



Cong Peiwu  
● [IRNA](http://IRNA)

governance experiences.

Cong said that China is interested in contributing to the development of a more just and equitable global governance system and offering more of its capacity to promote regional peace and sustainable global development

Mohammad Ali Rajabi  
Cartoonist

CARTOON





Tehran hosts Caspian Governors’ Forum to enhance regional cooperation

# Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea hold equal strategic significance: *Araghchi*

Economy Desk

Iran convened the first forum of governors from Caspian littoral provinces on Tuesday in the northern city of Rasht, signaling a strategic push to deepen regional collaboration on energy, transit corridors, environmental protection, and economic development around the world’s largest enclosed inland sea. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the two-day meeting — held under the slogan “The Caspian: A Bridge of Friendship and Regional Development” — Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi emphasized Tehran’s commitment to what he described as “provincial diplomacy,” an initiative aimed at cementing ties between subnational authorities across the Caspian region. “Just as the Persian Gulf and its surrounding areas are important to us, the Caspian Sea holds equal strategic significance,” Araghchi said. “The littoral states have long recognized the shared interests and, at times, common concerns in this region, leading us to initiate cooperative frameworks years ago.” Araghchi highlighted that Iran’s foreign policy prioritizes its neighbors, with a focus on leveraging political, economic, social, cultural, and security capacities for mutual benefit. He added that the Caspian region is “crucial not only in energy but also in transit corridors,” and that economic and trade cooperation among Caspian states via the sea route carries “extraordinary importance” for all involved. The forum, organized at Iran’s initiative, brought together delegations from nine foreign regions and five Iranian provinces. It follows a recent Caspian heads-of-state summit and precedes an upcoming meeting of foreign ministers

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi addresses the opening ceremony of the first forum of governors from Caspian littoral provinces in Rasht, Gilan Province, on November 18, 2025. [mfa.gov.ir](#)

from the five Caspian littoral countries — Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. “This gathering today represents a form of ‘provincial diplomacy’ that Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched some time ago,” Araghchi told reporters in a press briefing on the sidelines of the meeting. Officials stressed that the forum aims to familiarize Caspian coastal provinces with each other’s capabilities and challenges, and to create joint mechanisms for problem-solving. “There are excellent opportunities for collaboration — in transit corridors, energy, tourism, and trade,” Araghchi noted. “Having governors engage directly will help them better understand and utilize each other’s potential.” A joint communiqué is currently being drafted and is expected to be issued following approval by all participating governors, he said.

### ‘Unified zone’

Kazem Gharibabadi, the deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs, underscored the interconnected fate of Caspian coastal communities, calling the sea “a unified civilizational, economic, environmental, and security zone.” “The coastal provinces of all five littoral states bear significant responsibility in managing the Caspian’s rich resources — from its valuable fisheries and



vital energy reserves to commercial ports and international transit routes,” Gharibabadi said. The deputy foreign minister added that the Caspian Sea is the world’s largest source of sturgeon and caviar-producing fish, making its fisheries “fundamental to regional food security.” He stressed that sustainable management, combating illegal fishing, and joint stock-rebuilding programs are only possible through coordinated action among provinces.

### 40% of Dagestan’s trade is with Iran

Russian officials echoed Iran’s emphasis on regional synergy, with Abdulmuslim Abdulmuslimov, the prime minister of the Republic of Dagestan, noting that 40% of his region’s foreign trade is with Iran and identifying the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as a top priority for Moscow. Igor Babushkin, the governor of Russia’s Astrakhan Region, called the forum “a sign of growing cooperation at

the highest levels,” adding, “We live in a unique region endowed with vast resources and potential for collaboration. Given these assets, we must reinforce our partnerships — especially as our national leaders attach special importance to our dialogue.” Also present was the deputy prime minister of the Republic of Kalmykia, who described the inaugural governors’ forum as “a positive step toward strengthening ties and communication among Caspian coastal regions.”

## Caviar exports surge in H1 calendar year as Qatar tops buyers list



Economy Desk

Iran exported 3.5 metric tons of caviar worth \$2.314 million in the first half of the Iranian calendar year (began on March 21), with Qatar emerging as the top buyer, according to customs data released

Tuesday. Qatar accounted for the largest share of sales, purchasing 1,280 kilograms of Iranian caviar for \$763,000 — making it the first and most significant customer of Iran’s prized black gold. The United Arab Emirates followed closely in

second place, importing 1,000 kilograms valued at \$732,000. Germany rounded out the top three with 442 kilograms purchased for \$323,000, ISNA reported. Other key buyers included the Netherlands (150 kg, \$110,000), Hong Kong (90 kg, \$57,000), Canada (80 kg, \$54,000), Australia (75 kg, \$49,000), Brazil (50 kg, \$30,000), Switzerland (45 kg, \$27,000), and Japan (40 kg, \$30,000). In total, caviar was shipped to 30 countries across five continents, including Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Kuwait, Lebanon, Luxem-

bourg, Malaysia, Oman, Portugal, Romania, Seychelles, Sweden, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and South Africa. The caviar industry had increasingly relied on passenger travel to move product abroad — a practice that has drawn scrutiny from global regulators. As previously disclosed by Iran’s Fisheries Organization, at least 50% of all caviar exports leave the country via passenger luggage — a method that bypasses formal customs declarations and raises concerns over tax evasion and illicit trade.

## Iranian aviation chief visits UAE to explore avenues of cooperation

Economy Desk

Chief of Iran’s Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) Hossein Pourfarzaneh arrived in the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday to meet his UAE counterparts, following a formal invitation from Saif Mohammed al-Suwaidi, the head of the country’s General Civil Aviation Authority. Pourfarzaneh, who also serves as deputy minister of roads and urban development, is expected to hold talks with UAE authorities for bolstering aviation cooperation, ILNA reported. Key areas of collaboration under consideration include enhancing flight safety, exchanging techni-



cal expertise, expanding direct air services between the two countries, and co-operating in aviation personnel training. A preliminary agreement on air navigation, safety, and joint research and development is expected to

be signed during the visit — a step officials say could pave the way for the establishment of regular flights and the development of regional air services. The visit is part of Iran’s effort to develop its international air connectivity.

## Iran, Armenia agree on customs pact to boost trade, expand Meghri border

Economy Desk

The heads of customs authorities from Iran and Armenia met in Yerevan on Tuesday to review measures aimed at facilitating trade and expanding transit between the two countries, according to Tasnim News Agency. Iran’s Deputy Minister of Economy and Head of Customs Administration, Faroud Asgari, and Armenia’s

Head of Customs Administration, Edward Hakobyan, discussed in detail the upcoming customs programs designed to remove customs barriers and increase bilateral trade volumes. Key actions under review included the implementation of electronic information exchange between customs agencies, the establishment of continuous border meetings to assess on-the-ground cooperation, the mutual recognition of authorized

economic operators, and finalizing the customs “green corridor” to expedite trade flows. Armenian officials also presented a plan to expand the Meghri customs facility in the southern Armenia through joint public-private sector investment — a project expected to significantly increase the capacity of the Armenia-Iran border crossing. In recent weeks, such facilitative measures have already yielded re-

sults as daily truck traffic at the Norduz- Meghri border crossing — Iran’s only land border with Armenia and the primary gateway to Eurasian Economic Union countries — has risen from 450 to 550 trucks per day. The meeting underscored a coordinated push to transform the Norduz-Meghri corridor into a more efficient trade artery between Iran and the broader Eurasian region.





# A new face to an old strategy

## Kazakhstan, Abraham Accords, and Israel’s soft power game in Eurasia



US President Donald Trump (3rd-L) shakes hands with the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, the US, on November 7, 2025.

By Mohammad-Ali Ghanamizadeh Fallahi  
Expert on international affairs

### OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Kazakhstan’s adherence to the Abraham Accords cannot be construed as a merely symbolic or diplomatic maneuver. This occurrence epitomizes the reconfiguration of geopolitical power within a region now serving as the crucible of contestation among three cardinal actors — China, Russia, and Iran — centripetally oriented around Central Asia. While the war in Ukraine has destabilized the equilibrium of power across Eurasia, and China deepens its economic infiltration through the Belt and Road Initiative, the West and Israel endeavor to construct a supple and multidimensional front for reciprocal penetration.

Kazakhstan’s resolution to join the Abraham Accords must therefore be interpreted within a framework transcending bilateral relations with Israel. This event constitutes a segment of an emergent politico-security architecture in Central Asia, wherein the rivalry among global powers transpires not on battlefields but within the domains of diplomacy, technology, and culture.

The Abraham Accords were, at their inception, a project for normalizing Israel’s relations with Arab states; yet in the strategic logic of the United States and Tel Aviv, they have always signified something far more profound than “Middle Eastern peace” — a mechanism for reconfiguring Eurasia’s security architecture along non-traditional axes of power. Kazakhstan’s inclusion — an Islamic polity possessing a geostrategic locus between Russia and China — signifies, in essence, the transference of the pact’s gravitational center from the Middle East to Central Asia, a region that in recent years, particularly after the Ukrainian conflict, has metamorphosed into an arena of ideological and economic contention among the great powers.

At present, the Abraham Accords have evolved into a polymorphic instrument for soft influence and geopolitical engineering. From the perspective of the United States, this trajectory represents a conduit for geocultural and technological infiltration into territories hitherto under the economic hegemony of China and the security dominion of Russia. For Israel, it constitutes a step toward the construction of a consortium of amicable states encircling Iran and Russia — an echo of Ben-Gurion’s archaic logic of “the alliance of the periphery.”

While China constructs, from the East, a web of economic influence through its Belt and Road initiative, and Russia, subsequent to the war in Ukraine, struggles to preserve its sway over the former Soviet

republics, the United States and Israel, through the Abraham Accords, seek to engender a kind of soft belt of technological, educational, and informational cooperation surrounding these two powers. This intangible belt complements China’s tangible one, yet possesses a cultural and digital essence; instead of roads and railways, it operates through investments in energy, data technology, cybersecurity, and education. Within this dynamic, Kazakhstan becomes the gateway for the West’s gradual permeation into Central Asia — a region until recently revolving predominantly within Moscow’s and Beijing’s orbits. For Israel, this accession represents an epochal opportunity to transcend the Middle Eastern framework and advance into the heart of Eurasia — the very juncture where the two colossal powers, China and Russia, converge.

At the substratum of this process lies a discernible revival of Ben-Gurion’s historical doctrine — a security paradigm emphasized by Israel’s founding father, predicated upon alliances with non-Arab peripheries to contain Arab adversaries. Ben-Gurion contended that Israel’s security could be ensured solely through the subtle encirclement of its enemies — by forging a ring of non-hostile states and minorities surrounding the Arab world. In the 1950s and 1960s, this strategy materialized through close relations with Pahlavi Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia. Today, that same doctrine is reincarnated in a novel form: the instruments of coercion are supplanted by technology, data, eco-

nomics, and cultural narrative. Israel no longer requires the assertion of military might or direct border presence to delineate its security; instead, by infiltrating the soft infrastructures of states — from education to technology and cybersecurity — it pursues the same objective with diminished expenditure and amplified efficacy. In this sense, the Abraham Accords are not merely a political covenant but a mechanism for reconstructing Ben-Gurion’s “peripheral axis” on a global scale.

Kazakhstan’s adherence to this pact, beyond altering the equilibrium among the great powers, bears immediate repercussions for regional actors such as Iran, China, and Russia. For Iran, the development signifies the amplification of Israeli influence to its northern frontier — a region of acute security, intelligence, and transit significance. Israel’s formal presence in Kazakhstan grants access to economic data, energy routes, and even social intelligence within the Caspian domain, potentially enfeebling Iran’s strategic depth in Central Asia.

For China, these transformations denote the emergence of a subtle rival along the margins of the Belt and Road project. The West and Israel, leveraging technology, media, and education, are constructing a cultural stratum of influence that could contest the Chinese developmental paradigm.

Meanwhile, Russia — situated in a defensive posture since the Ukrainian war — observes this evolution with apprehension. From the Kremlin’s vantage, the presence of Israel and the United States in



From the perspective of the United States, this trajectory represents a conduit for geocultural and technological infiltration into territories hitherto under the economic hegemony of China and the security dominion of Russia. For Israel, it constitutes a step toward the construction of a consortium of amicable states encircling Iran and Russia — an echo of Ben-Gurion’s archaic logic of “the alliance of the periphery”.

The map identifies Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries by coloring them.



Kazakhstan represents a form of indirect NATO expansion into Russia’s “backyard,” an encroachment effectuated not through tanks and military bases but via technology and economic diplomacy.

Yet beyond these three major powers, another actor will inevitably be affected by this transformation: Turkey. Kazakhstan’s accession to the Abraham Accords engenders a foundational dilemma for the Organization of Turkic States, established under Ankara’s aegis. In recent years, Turkey has endeavored — through cultural, educational, and defense policies — to fashion itself as the natural leader of the Turkic world. However, Israel’s entrance into Kazakhstan’s regional relations effectively heralds the intrusion of a competitor endowed with advanced technology and Western backing. Such penetration could disrupt the internal equilibrium of the Organization of Turkic States and attenuate its identity cohesion, for the organization’s foundation rests upon linguistic, cultural, and historical affinities, and Israel’s partnership with one of its pivotal members challenges its cultural homogeneity through strategic collaboration.

For Turkey, this transformation is not merely a symbolic challenge but a tangible menace to its influence in Central Asia. Both Israel and Turkey operate within analogous domains — military technology, cybersecurity, and economic diplomacy — yet Israel, buttressed by extensive Western political and financial support, can swiftly ascend to the status of an influential regional actor. Should Tel Aviv institutionalize its security and technological cooperation with Kazakhstan through the Abraham Accords, Turkey would confront a strategic duality within the Organization of Turkic States: on one side, its commitment to pan-Turkic solidarity; on the other, the pragmatic necessity of engaging with a state now aligned with Israel. This dichotomy, in the long term, may engender intra-organizational divergence and diminish Ankara’s prominence within Central Asia.


From this vantage, Kazakhstan’s accession to the Abraham Accords not only recalibrates the balance of power between East and West but also reverberates through the internal configuration of the Turkic world. Israel, wielding the instruments of soft power, now penetrates a sphere that Turkey has long regarded as its historical sphere of influence. This subtle rivalry, ostensibly couched in the rhetoric of economic and technological cooperation, is, at its core, an endeavor to redefine cultural and geopolitical influence across the region. Should Turkey fail to articulate a cogent response, it risks a gradual descent from the role of indigenous leader of the Turkic world to that of a peripheral participant in Western projects.

Ultimately, it may be asserted that the Abraham Accords, in their renewed incarnation, have become the operational embodiment of the very rationale that the Ben-Gurion Doctrine envisioned decades ago: the containment of adversaries through peripheral alliances and indirect partnerships. The sole distinction is that today such containment is executed through technology, digital economy, and cultural diplomacy. In an era wherein wars no longer commence exclusively with armies, the Abraham Accords represent the modern incarnation of soft warfare — a conflict whose battlefield lies not in the Middle East but within Central Asia. In this conflict, Kazakhstan becomes Israel’s new bastion and the experimental laboratory of Western influence in the Turkic world, compelling Turkey, Russia, China, and Iran each to recalibrate their strategies in response to the resurgence of the Ben-Gurion Doctrine. The doctrine endures, yet in an altered guise: not with armies and armaments, but with data, education, capital, and technology. Once again, Israel reconstructs its periphery — animated by the same logic, yet equipped with entirely modern instruments — and this time, at the very heart of Central Asia.



# Syria comes in from the cold



 **By M.K. Bhadrakumar**  
Former Indian ambassador

## OPINION

With great prescience, late Henry Kissinger had once said, “You can’t make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can’t make peace without Syria.” The adage remains true even today. Syria has been an astute practitioner of diplomacy in its statecraft, which was not surprising given its origin as a modern state out of the debris of the Ottoman Empire, its geography, plural society, and tough neighbourhood. Suffice to say, there is nothing surprising that US President Donald Trump sees immense potential in Syria’s interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa as an interlocutor, while resetting his compass for a New Middle East. Trump’s seemingly blasé attitude came out in a social media post on November 10, when he wrote that he and Sharaa “discussed all the intricacies of PEACE in the Middle East, of which he is a major advocate.” Trump is a rare Western leader who closely follows Russia’s footfalls with a healthy respect. He couldn’t have missed the quiet confidence with which President Vladimir Putin is restructuring Russia’s interactions with Damascus — and is even exploring a reformed Moscow-Damascus-Tehran triangle as a pillar of regional stability. In fact, immediately after Sharaa’s meeting with Putin in the Kremlin in October, Alexander Lavrentyev, presidential envoy to the Middle East, visited Tehran

to discuss regional security, Syria’s territorial integrity, and further coordination with the Russian delegation. Russia’s Ambassador to Tehran Alexei Dedov also disclosed that Russia and Iran hold regular consultations on the Syrian issue and hold “similar positions on key aspects of resolving the crisis”. Be that as it may, the Russian-Syrian mutual confidence is reaching a point that Damascus seeks patrols of the southern provinces by Russian military police, which could limit Israeli activity in the border areas. Russia has reportedly conducted its first patrol since the change of power — near Qamishli in northeast Syria, which Turkey regards as its sphere of influence. However, trust the US security establishment to pressure al-Sharaa over his contacts with Russia. After all, the CIA holds the copyright of al-Sharaa’s incubation in the Iraqi jail for 5 years and eventual transformation as an Islamist who got rid of the clutches of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Inevitably, the US will exploit al-Sharaa’s keenness to foster closer relations with Washington, which is crucial for the lifting of sanctions that opens the pathway for foreign investment and Syria’s reconstruction (which the World Bank estimates will cost \$216 billion). Al-Sharaa’s induction into the US-led counter-terrorist coalition fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda remnants in Syria burnishes his image in the international community. That said, wouldn’t al-Sharaa know about the US’s controversial record vis-à-vis ISIS and al-Qaeda as its geopolitical tools? Most certainly, yes. Such pragmatism becomes al-

Sharaa’s trademark, which Moscow understood all along. Al-Sharaa’s younger brother, Maher al-Sharaa, studied in Russia, graduated from the Burdenko Voronezh State Medical University in 2000, and subsequently worked in Voronezh for many years as an obstetrician-gynaecologist. He is married to a Russian national, Tatiana Zakirova, whose family is reported to have business interests and connections within the Russian government, further cementing Maher’s ties to Moscow. Maher today holds the key position as secretary-general of the presidency in Damascus, coordinating directly with the president, drafting decrees, overseeing the implementation of executive decisions, facilitating communication between state institutions, etc. — all in all, playing a strategic role. However, this is only a part of the story of Russia’s remarkable rebound over the past 10 months since Assad’s fall. If Russia has been, is, and will be a significant presence in Syria, it is for a variety of reasons — not only geopolitical. What prompts al-Sharaa to engage with Russia are principally three considerations: first, the pull of the Soviet Union’s huge contributions to Syria’s economy and infrastructure, especially in areas like the health sector. Russia has a tradition of never interfering in Syria’s internal affairs even while engaged deeply, which is a touchstone for al-Sharaa. Second, Russia has an excellent record as a provider of security. Syrian Defence Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra has visited Moscow thrice during the past four months, the last time as recently as on October 28, just a week before al-Sharaa’s



◀ Syria’s President Ahmed al-Sharaa (c) waves as he enters the White House in Washington, the US, on November 10, 2025.  
● JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

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Trump is a rare Western leader who closely follows Russia’s footfalls with a healthy respect. He couldn’t have missed the quiet confidence with which President Vladimir Putin is restructuring Russia’s interactions with Damascus — and is even exploring a reformed Moscow-Damascus-Tehran triangle as a pillar of regional stability.

▼ Russian armored vehicles conduct a patrol on the Qamishli-Derik road in northeastern Syria on October 1, 2025.  
● NORTH PRESS

scheduled meeting with Trump in the White House. While receiving the minister, Russia’s Defence Minister Andrey Belousov noted, “The fact that we are here again, at the negotiating table, demonstrates that contacts between our political leaders and contacts between our military ministries are truly meaningful, fruitful, and have great potential.” Al-Sharra is in ISIS’s crosshairs, and even otherwise, Syria’s security situation is precarious. An estimated 2000 ISIS fighters are still operating in Syria, and government forces also have a preponderant share of hardcore Islamist cadres who won’t easily reconcile. Besides, the sectarian divides threaten national unity. The Kurds, in particular, are resisting integration. Curiously, this is one area where Moscow can help, given its long-standing links with Kurdish groups. Then, there is the threat from Israel’s “land grab”. Trump’s priority is to normalise Syria’s relations with Israel, get Damascus to accept Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights, and get al-Sharaa into the Abraham Accords. Prima facie, this is all a bit too much for al-Sharaa to accept. Clearly, continued Russian military presence serves a useful purpose for Damascus. Third, al-Sharaa seeks to diversify Syria’s external relations. He hopes to reclaim Syria’s legacy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. Slowly but steadily, China is also engaging with al-Sharaa. The Chinese embassy in Damascus remained open throughout recent instability, while Beijing adopted a cautious, “risk management” approach primarily driven by security concerns and a desire to protect its interests. The topmost priority for Beijing is the prominent role of fighters from the Turkistan Islamic Party within the new Syrian security and defence structures, composed mainly of ethnic Uyghurs from Xinjiang. China refrained from the UN Security Council vote that lifted some terror-related sanctions on al-Sharaa, and instead abstained, citing its concerns. But China is engaging bilaterally with al-Sharaa’s government to protect its interests and keep channels open. The Chinese ambassador to Damascus has held meetings with al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, where the Syrian side expressed a desire for “strategic partnership” and China’s support for reconstruction. Beijing seems to accept that al-Sharaa has discarded his jihadi pedigree. The Xinhua stated in a dispatch last week: “Al-Sharaa once joined al-Qaeda and was wanted by the US as a terrorist with a bounty of \$10 million on his head, but severed his ties with the terrorist organisation years ago and led the rebel forces that toppled then Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in December 2024.” No doubt, the regime change in Damascus was a significant blow to Iran’s regional strategy. Iranian military commanders and personnel, including Quds Force members, were quickly evacuated from Syria as rebel forces advanced on Damascus. All Iranian military bases have since been abandoned. But there are signs lately of Tehran exploring informal, pragmatic relations with the al-Sharaa government. Al-Sharaa once described the victory over Assad as an “end of the Iranian project,” but those were words spoken in the heat of the moment. The litmus test is whether Iran is attempting to destabilise the al-Sharaa government. Here, the answer is a definitive no. Against such a complex backdrop, the US intentions remain extremely ambivalent. Al-Sharaa’s bid to cement his alignment with the US is buffeted by strong headwinds ranging from Israel’s territorial ambitions in southern Syria and its strategy to keep Syria weak and divided to the Kurdish challenge in the north, and a spluttering economy.

The article first appeared on Indian Punchline.



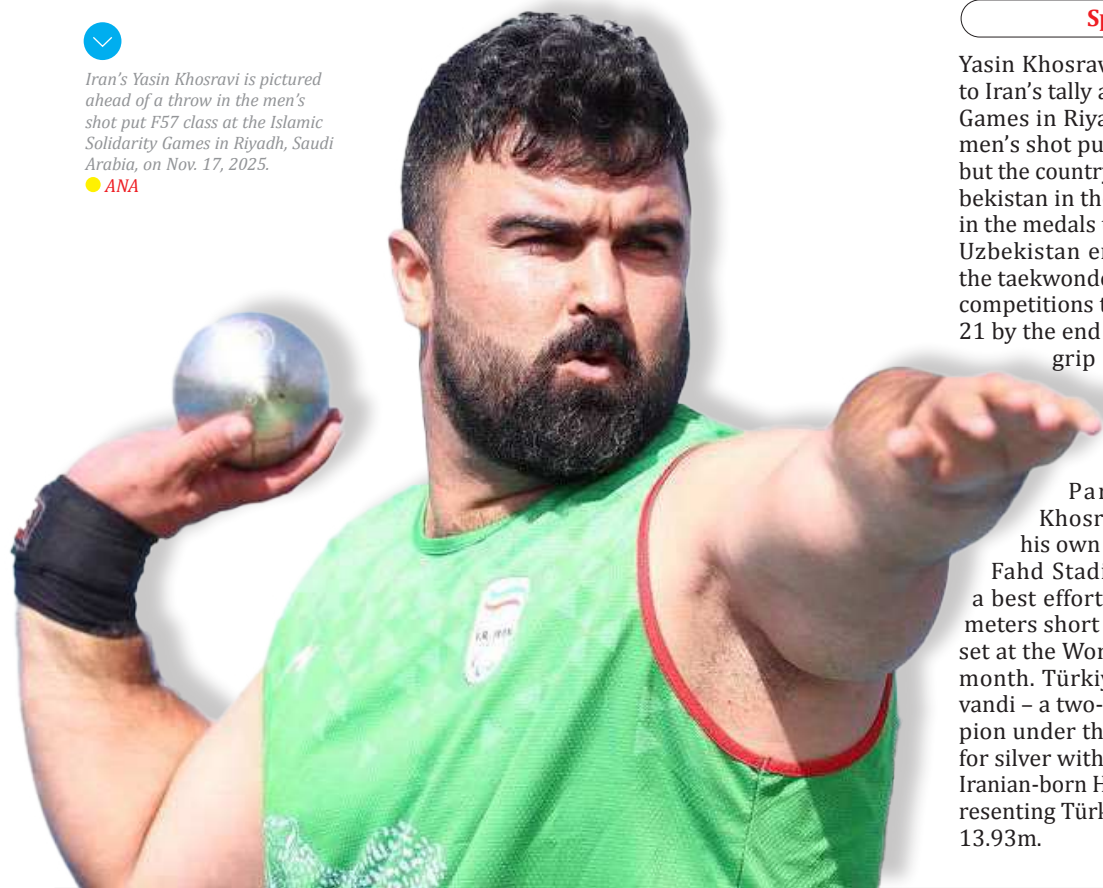
## Riyadh 2025 Islamic Solidarity Games:

## Khosravi wins shot put gold, but Uzbekistan pulls away from Iran in medals table



Iran's Yasin Khosravi is pictured ahead of a throw in the men's shot put F57 class at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Nov. 17, 2025.

● ANA



## Sports Desk

Yasin Khosravi added the 17th gold to Iran's tally at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh with victory in the men's shot put F57 class on Monday, but the country fell further behind Uzbekistan in the race for second place in the medals table.

Uzbekistan enjoyed success across the taekwondo, athletics, and fencing competitions to take its gold count to 21 by the end of Day 9, tightening its grip on the runner-up spot with four days remaining in the multi-sport event.

Reigning world and Paralympic champion Khosravi was in a league of his own at the Prince Faisal Bin Fahd Stadium, dominating with a best effort of 15.65m – 95 centimeters short of the world record he set at the World Championships last month. Türkiye's Mohammad Khalvandi – a two-time Paralympic champion under the Iranian flag – settled for silver with a 14.45m throw, while Iranian-born Hamed Heidari, also representing Türkiye, finished third with 13.93m.

## Taekwondo bronze

Meanwhile, Melika Mirhosseini capped a strong run for the Iranian women's taekwondo squad by taking a consolation bronze in the +70kg weight class.

The team captain bounced back from a semifinal setback against Uzbekistan's Svetlana Osipova to defeat Pakistan's Manish Ali in straight rounds (5-1, 11-2) in the third-place bout, securing Iran's fifth medal across six women's categories.

Sayna Karimi, 19, was a surprise -46kg gold medalist on the opening day of the taekwondo event, while Yalda Valinejad settled for -70kg silver, and teenagers Hasti Mohammadi (-57kg) and Rozhan Goodarzi (-51kg) also finished with a bronze in their respective divisions.

Fatemeh Eskandarnia was the only Iranian woman to miss out on the medal following a 2-0 loss to Diyorakhon Azizova of Uzbekistan in her first bout in the -63kg category on Sunday.

Iran's Hamed Asghari (-67kg) and Ali Ahmadi (+82kg) also finished empty-handed in the men's competition. The Iranian six-man squad collected three medals through Ali-Asghar

Moradian (-60kg gold), Amirreza Sadeqian (-82kg silver), and Ali Khosravesh (-74kg bronze) across three days of taekwondo action.

"We sent our second teams to the Games. The squad included participants aged 17 and 19, who promise a bright future for Iranian taekwondo," said Hadi Saei, chairman of the Iranian Taekwondo Federation.

"We came to these competitions with a well-structured plan. Even before the World Championships in October, we had adopted a strategy of giving opportunities to our young talents, and thankfully, that approach paid off," added the taekwondo legend.

"We won't abandon these young talents, as they are the future of our sport, and they will be given the chance to compete in upcoming events."

Elsewhere at the Games, Iran routed the Maldives 49-13 to secure a semifinal spot in women's handball.

Sanaz Rajabi, Aseman Badvi, and Bahar Eizadgashb led the scoring for Iran with six goals apiece, as the team finished runner-up to Türkiye in Group A and set up a last-four clash with Kazakhstan today.

## Iran beats New Zealand 6-1 in pre-Futsal World Cup friendly

## Sports Desk

Iran secured an impressive 6-1 victory over New Zealand on Tuesday in its second warm-up outing ahead of the inaugural FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup, which kicks off Friday in the Philippines. Mahsa Kamali, Nasimeh Gholami, and Fereshteh Khosravi found the net for the Asian powerhouse in the first half, before Gholami added her second goal after the break, with Elham Anafjeh and Mahtab Banaei also on the scoresheet.

Shahzad Mozaffar's side had shared the spoils with Poland in a 1-1 draw in Pasig – the host city of the World Cup – on Sunday.

"These two matches were extremely beneficial for us, as we gave game time to the entire squad to test different scenarios with various lineups," Mozaffar said after the game.

"I'm very pleased that several of the players managed to get on the scoresheet today. I'm fully satisfied with the performance level of the entire team; the players delivered a high-quality performance, which is a very positive takeaway for us.



● FFIRI

"Both sides employed the powerplay at different stages of the game today, which helped us simulate the condi-

tions of a competitive match. These kinds of games were exactly what we needed to prepare the team for the World Cup," added the Iranian coach, who replaced Forouzan Soleimani after a mediocre Asian Cup campaign in May, in which the two-time

zil, Italy, and Panama.

The Iranian team will get their campaign underway against eight-time Copa America champion Brazil – the top team in the latest FIFA World Ranking – on Sunday, before taking on Panama three days later, and world

champion settled for a third-place finish.

Iran is drawn in Group D of the World Cup alongside Bra-

No. 7 Italy on Nov. 29.

The top two teams in the group will progress to the round of 16.

## Shahsavari jumps 95 spots in ITTF World Ranking

## Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis player Neda Shahsavari made a remarkable leap in the latest ITTF World Ranking, released Tuesday, climbing 95 spots to 133rd in the women's singles standings.

Shahsavari spearheaded Iran's table tennis medal haul at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh last week, capturing gold in both the singles and doubles competitions, while adding a bronze in the women's team event.

The Iranian captain pulled off a sensational fightback to defeat Syria's Hend

Zaza 4-2 (7-11, 10-12, 11-9, 11-9, 11-8, 13-11) in the singles final on Thursday, having teamed up with Shima Safaei to rally past Türkiye's Ece Haraç and Özge Yilmaz in four games (9-11, 11-6, 11-9, 11-8) in the doubles showdown earlier in the day.

Safaei moved up 14 spots to 166th, while Setayesh Illoukhani, a member of the bronze-winning trio in Riyadh, stood at 356th.

In the men's ranking, Iranian teenage sensation Benyamin Faraji dropped nine spots to 145th, despite winning a team silver and doubles bronze in Riyadh.

## 25th Summer Deaflympics:

## Iran rounds out judo campaign with team bronze

## Sports Desk

Iran collected five bronze medals to cap a solid run in the men's judo competition at the Tokyo Summer Deaflympics.

The Iranian trio of Ali Salahshour, Hossein Allahkarimi, and Masoud Rastegar secured a third-place finish in the team event, thanks to a 2-0 victory over Türkiye on Tuesday.

The team began with a 2-0 win against Brazil and then emerged victorious (2-1) over South Korea, before suffering a 2-0 semifinal setback against Kazakhstan. This marked a second medal for the trio, following their bronze-winning campaigns earlier in the multi-sport event.

Meanwhile, Amirmohammad Daftari (-73kg), Ali Sheikh (-60kg), and Farid Asakereh (-100kg) were unfortunate to finish fifth in their respective events, while Mostafa Sefidi fell to a first-round exit in the -81kg division.

## Shooting bronze

Elsewhere, Mahla Samiei added an impressive shooting medal for Iran, finishing third in the women's 10m air pistol event.

After posting 556.1 points in the qualification round to secure a top-eight spot, Samiei tallied 215.5 points in Monday's final, finishing behind India's Anuya Prasad, who set a new world record with 241.1 points, and Pranjali Prashant Dhumal (236.8 points). Iran is represented by 83 athletes – including 19 female contestants – competing in football, freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling, athletics, karate, taekwondo, shooting, judo, bowling, badminton, table tennis, swimming, and beach volleyball at the 25th edition of the Summer Deaflympics. Iran achieved its best finish in the medals table at the previous edition in Caxias do Sul, Brazil, coming fourth with 14 golds, 12 silvers, and 14 bronzes.



● SEYYED ALI SALEH/BORNA NEWS



● ISNA



# International delegation explores Mazandaran’s tourism potential

Iranica Desk

CEOs of tourism companies from Russia and Turkmenistan, accompanied by a group of influencers from Kazakhstan, spent three days touring Mazandaran Province to explore its natural, historical, and recreational attractions, according to Mehdi Es’haqi, Deputy Head of Mazandaran Province’s Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization. Es’haqi said the visit aimed to introduce Mazandaran’s diverse tourism potential to international industry leaders and assess opportunities for joint investment. He added that the tour was part of a familiarization (FAM) trip organized under the “Mazandaran: The Green Gateway to Iran” initiative, ISNA reported. During their stay, the delegation visited several key destinations across the province, including Savadkuh, Babolsar, Behshahr, Amol, and Chamestan. They toured scenic northern railway routes, the Barenjestanak recreational complex, Mizban forest lodge, the shrine of Imamzadeh Ebrahim in Babolsar, the UNESCO-listed Abbasabad Garden in Behshahr, the Miankaleh International Wet-

land, and Elimalat Forest Park. Es’haqi noted that the visit received positive feedback from local tourism stakeholders. He emphasized that the participation of representatives from Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan signals a significant step toward fostering regional tourism cooperation and strengthening Mazandaran Province’s role in cultural and economic exchanges among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). He highlighted that continued international initiatives of this nature will enhance Mazandaran’s global profile while showcasing its wealth of natural and historical attractions to a wider international audience. Mazandaran Province attracts millions of domestic tourists annually from across Iran. Its stunning natural landscapes and cultural richness draw both domestic and international travelers, with thousands of foreign visitors exploring its diverse attractions each year. While Mazandaran offers scenic beauty year-round, autumn reveals a particularly exceptional charm. The ancient Hyrcanian forests erupt in an array of vibrant colors, with towering trees creating a mesmerizing canopy that refreshes the senses. Mazandaran is home to

dense Hyrcanian woodlands, hundreds of kilometers of coastline, a pleasant climate, and more than 3,000 recorded cultural and historical sites, securing its position as one of Iran’s top tourism hubs. The province holds 80 nationally registered cultural heritage sites, including historic architecture, traditional customs, and regional cultural practices. Nearly 40% of these registered sites consist of historic buildings. Additionally, Mazandaran hosts 15,000 religious endowments, 361 shrines, and over 8,000 religious structures, including mosques, tekies, and hosseiniehs. The province’s forests are especially renowned for their autumn foliage. The colorful beech, hornbeam, and poplar trees cast luminous yellow and deep brown shades, amplifying the natural allure and drawing nature lovers from near and far. In the Savadkuh region, towering and dense beech trees rise so high they appear to support the sky. Beneath them lies a natural carpet of golden and crimson leaves—an enchanting sight that peaks in autumn and offers a breathtaking landscape year-round. The Abbasabad Lake, part of the Alimestan Forest, located 52 kilometers from Amol, is another

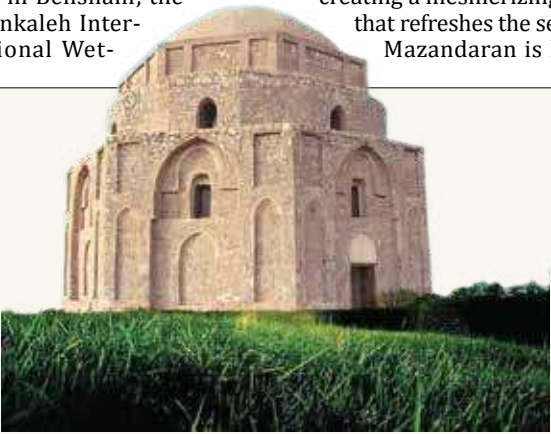


● ISNA

natural treasure. With its pristine landscape, diverse wildlife, and valleys often shrouded in mist, it provides a surreal and peaceful escape. A trip through this dreamlike forest offers an unforgettable experience and lasting memories. Abbasabad Lake, part of the Abbasabad Cultural and Recreational Complex in Behshahr,

is also a seasonal highlight, especially in autumn when its surrounding trees turn brilliant shades. Other scenic autumn destinations across Mazandaran include Javaher Deh village, and the 2000 and 3000-meter peaks of Tonekabon. Visitors can also enjoy Telar Forest Park, located about 15 kilometers from Qaemshahr.

This tranquil woodland is an ideal setting for a leisurely walk or picnic. Sisangan Forest Park in Nowshahr stands as one of Mazandaran’s most famous attractions, renowned for its stunning variety of tree species and spectacular display of autumn colors that captivate visitors year after year.



● itto.org

## Emergency restoration begins on Jabalieh Dome in Kerman

Iranica Desk

The emergency restoration of the historic Jabalieh Dome in Kerman Province has commenced following approval by the Technical Council and is being carried out by a qualified contractor, according to the deputy head of Kerman Province’s Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization. The announcement comes amid recent reports circulating on social media alleging improper restoration practices at the site, ISNA wrote. Farnaz Farahi-Moqaddam confirmed that signs of moisture damage and environmental erosion prompted the issue to be raised in the Technical Council, which approved urgent restoration measures. “The last major restoration of the Jabalieh Dome was carried out in 2012, but recent technical assessments indicated that continued erosion could cause serious structural damage and even pose a safety risk to visitors,” she explained. Farahi-Moqaddam added that following thorough monitoring and technical evaluations, emergency restoration work is now underway. “The restoration workshop is fully active. Initial phases are being conducted using traditional plaster, and in the final stage, the mortar will be carefully matched to the original color and texture of the structure,” she added. The Jabalieh Dome, also known as the Gabri Dome, is a historic stone-and-gypsum structure dating back to the Sassanian era. The octagonal building is one of the most iconic remnants of early Persian architecture in the region.

## Craftsmen restore ancient Lenj-building tradition in Persian Gulf

Iranica Desk

The construction of one of Iran’s last wooden Lenj (traditional fishing boats) in the historic port of Bandar Kong in Hormozgan Province has finally been completed after a 12-year hiatus and numerous challenges, and the large vessel, with a capacity of 600 tons, has now been launched. According to Ali Pouzan, director of the Gouran Boat Manufacturing Open-Air Museum and a prominent advocate for southern maritime heritage, this milestone emerges at a critical time when traditional Lenj-building in southern Iran is nearing complete extinction, chtn. ir wrote. The project began 12 years ago in the workshop of the late master craftsman Abdullah Ebrahimi. Work was halted repeatedly due to financial constraints, rising material costs, and the lack of official support. However, Pouzan noted that, thanks to the perseverance of Ebrahimi’s heirs and project partners, the vessel was ultimately completed using traditional, entirely manual methods — without engineering plans, relying solely on the indigenous knowledge passed down through centuries of hands-on experience and oral instruction. He also lamented that most of the master craftsmen involved in the project have since passed away. Pouzan revealed that only two wooden Lenjs of the original Iranian tradition remain operational today — one in Kong and another at the Guran workshop. This stark figure underscores the urgent threat of extinction faced by this centuries-old craft. He added that one of the main obstacles is access to suitable timber. Historically, teak wood was imported



● chtn.ir

ed from India or Malaysia, but today such imports are prohibitively difficult and expensive. As a result, fiberglass and metal Lenjs — which are cheaper and quicker to construct — have largely supplanted traditional wooden vessels, discouraging investment in the latter and pushing many skilled craftsmen out of work. Constructing a large wooden Lenj requires more than 200 cubic meters of timber and typically takes between one and two years, while a fiberglass boat can be completed in just a few months. This vast difference in time and cost has made it difficult for traditional builders to compete in the modern market. Pouzan emphasized that traditional Lenj-building is not merely a craft but a vital part of Iran’s intangible cultural heritage, and that its survival depends on structured training programs. In the

past, Lenj-building knowledge was passed down directly within families — fathers teaching sons through hands-on practice in workshops. Today, however, the closure of most workshops has severed this chain of transmission. He believes that unless formal training in Lenj-building is introduced into technical and vocational institutions in southern Iran, within a decade there will be no one capable of building a wooden Lenj from start to finish. One proposed solution, Pouzan said, is the establishment of a permanent coordination council — including the Cultural Heritage Organization, Ports and Maritime Organization, free economic zones, industry stakeholders, and the Hormozgan Chamber of Commerce — to strategize the preservation and revitalization of the industry. He stressed that UNESCO’s recognition of Persian Gulf Lenj-building as Intangible Cultural Heritage offers a key opportunity to mobilize financial and educational resources. He further highlighted the need

for establishing living museums and training workshops in ports such as Kong, Laft, and Guran. In countries like Oman and the UAE, traditional Lenj-building workshops have been successfully integrated into tourism and vocational training sectors. Pouzan expressed confidence that Iran has similar potential — pending strategic cultural and economic policymaking. Experts emphasize that traditional Lenj-building extends far beyond a mere technical skill — it has historically been a cornerstone of the economy in southern Iranian ports. For centuries, maritime trade in the Persian Gulf was closely linked to the construction and maintenance of dhows, supporting the livelihoods of hundreds of families. According to Pouzan, the decline of this industry has had a direct and profound impact on coastal communities. With the cessation of Lenj construction, the entire network of related occupations — including carpentry, painting, sail-making, and even local transportation — has vanished. In the past, constructing a single Lenj could provide employment for dozens of individuals over several years. Today, that economic capacity has been entirely lost. He highlighted the creation of a living Lenj-building museum as a key strategy to preserve this traditional knowledge. He noted that educational demonstration workshops could be established in the ports of Kong and Laft, as well as in the village of Guran, enabling tourists and researchers to witness the Lenj construction process firsthand. Such a center would not only help revive traditional skills but also create new economic opportunities through cultural tourism.





# Iran seeks Caspian basin's top health tourism hub with largest regional capacity

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri on Tuesday pushed a regional drive to turn the country into the Caspian basin's leading hub for health tourism, telling a gathering of Caspian governors in the northern city of Rasht that Iran now commands "the biggest capacity" for medical travel in the wider region. The minister used the two-day international meeting of the governors of the Caspian littoral provinces in Iran's northern city of Rasht, hosted by the government of President Masoud Pezeshkian, to press an economic pitch that Tehran sees as a fast way to draw foreign currency and anchor closer ties with Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Salehi-Amiri said 1.2 million foreign patients spent roughly \$2 billion in Iran last year and argued that the country's mix of specialist hospitals, low costs and "reliable" medical outcomes gives it an edge. Tehran is now targeting two million medical tourists a year and \$6 billion in health-tourism income by 2030, alongside 15 million general visitors bringing in an additional \$15 billion. "We can draw on our neighbors'

trust," he said, adding that the Caspian's shared heritage offers fertile ground for joint ventures. The minister anchored his pitch in geography. The Caspian, a vast inland sea with 6,500km of coastline, long served as a corridor for trade and culture between northern Iran and the Eurasian steppe. Tehran wants to revive that role. He pressed governors from Russia's southern littoral regions and the Caucasus to "open the door wider", arguing that rising cross-border traffic will "deepen" relations far beyond tourism. Salehi-Amiri said the Pezeshkian administration has already ordered all coastal provinces, from Gilan and Mazandaran on the Caspian to Hormozgan and Bushehr on the Persian Gulf, to draw up fresh maritime-tourism plans. That includes passenger vessels, small cruise links and incentives designed to coax more Russians and Azerbaijanis to the Iranian north. He noted that "serious" strategic talks with Moscow are under way and forecast a visible rise in Russian arrivals in Gilan "soon". He pointed to Iran's tourism footprint, 22,000 accommodation units nationwide and another 2,500 under construction,



*Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri speaks at the First Caspian Governor's Forum held in Iran's northern city of Rasht, Gilan on November 18, 2025.*  
● IRNA

and cast the northern trio of Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan as the "jewels" of domestic travel. Gilan alone hosts 3,648 tourism establishments, including 117 hotels and 190 eco-lodges. The government, he said, plans to nudge Iranians to travel more across the Caspian as well, building a reciprocal flow that can "anchor trust". Iran claims more than 1mn recorded heritage sites, 43,000 of them nationally listed and 29 inscribed on UNESCO's world register. Salehi-Amiri again pitched cultural affinity as a driver, saying that shared manuscripts, artefacts and customs displayed in museums across the region underline a "deep" common memory, a message intended to buttress Iran's push for cross-border tourism corridors. He urged Caspian provinces to join Iran in developing maritime tourism routes and invited them to put capital into 2,700 active Iranian tourism projects, prom-



ising "proper guarantees" and commercially "sound" returns. He also flagged upcoming presidential trips to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, framing them as part of the same diplomatic push. Salehi-Amiri placed Central Asia, the Caucasus and the broader Nowruz cultural sphere at the top of Iran's tourism priorities, followed by the Persian Gulf,

from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, and then large Muslim markets such as Egypt, Indonesia and Malaysia. China, Russia and India come next. He said he had already held talks with tourism ministers from China, India, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Oman, Armenia and Georgia during last week's meeting in Riyadh. Tourism now accounts for about

5% of Iran's GDP and employs 1.6mn people. The country drew 39 million foreign visitors last year and sent about 9 million Iranians abroad, figures the minister described as "acceptable" but improvable if coastal provinces push harder. "Tourism means contact between peoples," he said. "If we build it on trust, this chain will hold."

## Iran bets on reading revival as ministers target piracy, digital habits

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Abbas Salehi on Tuesday urged Iran's publishing sector to seize the momentum of this year's National Book Week and build a new reading culture that keeps pace with rapid social and technological shifts. Speaking to representatives from across the industry in central Tehran, he said the market needs determined efforts to "stir demand" and reclaim readers who have drifted towards fast digital content, IRNA reported. Iran's National Book Week, held nationwide from November 15 to 23, has taken on added weight this year as the government tries to reverse two decades of sliding non-academic reading. The long-term decline remains stark, yet senior officials insist the transition to digital literacy has created a new opening for Iranian publishers, educational institutions

and audiobook platforms. They make it clear that changing media habits should be treated not as a threat, but as an opportunity to reposition the industry. Salehi cited national surveys showing that the share of people reading non-textbook material has halved since 2003. But he also pointed to daily consumption of roughly 70 minutes of essays, commentary and scientific media on digital platforms, proof, he argued, that Iranians still crave knowledge, only in different formats. He pressed the industry to align with these habits rather than resist them, saying old assumptions about readers have become "a costly mistake". He told guilds that the ministry will lean into demand-building policies. Civil-service training, he said, can incorporate curated reading lists, while schools and kindergartens must prepare for structural changes that will alter how printed, audio and digital books appear in

the curriculum. Piracy remains a major concern, but the ministry now frames it as an area where decisive enforcement could finally steady the market. Salehi said the government intends to pursue illicit reprints and digital theft "from the root" and revive earlier campaigns that sharply reduced illegal copies. A new similarity-tracking platform will fast-track action against the unauthorized scraping of published texts. Several mid-sized publishers say these measures, if fully implemented, could restore enough confidence for them to commission more ambitious titles in philosophy, social sciences and contemporary history. President Masoud Pezeshkian reinforced the cultural message in a post on X, calling reading the nation's route to "staying alive" and remaining in the "caravan of civilization". His intervention has been welcomed by university presses that want stronger ties with the

administration to rebuild reading communities on campus. Qader Ashena, Salehi's senior adviser and secretary of the Public Culture Council, echoed the optimism during a student book festival in Tehran. He described the printed book as a "civilizational anchor" despite the rise of artificial intelligence and argued that university life must restore reading as a daily habit. He praised Iran's decades of academic cultural institutions, from student theater festivals to early opinion-polling centers, and said their revival can help push books back into the mainstream. Audiobook studios in Tehran report brisk growth, driven by long commuter hours and young listeners seeking structured content. Publishers say these platforms, combined with tighter anti-piracy measures and targeted incentives, could help bridge the gap between Iran's literary heritage and its modern digital consumption patterns.

## Hosseini clinches Rabat best actress prize

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian actress Fereshteh Hosseini seized the Best Actress Award at the 30th Rabat International Auteur Film Festival in the Moroccan capital, taking the prize for her lead role in 'Dwelling Among the Gods,' a Serbia-Croatia-Italy co-production directed by Vuk Ršumović. Hosseini had already picked up top acting honors for the same performance in Pula in coastal Croatia, Otranto near Rome, Euro Balkan in Italy and the Hong Kong Lights festival. The film, a character-driven drama, has built steady momentum across Europe's



arthouse circuit, IRNA reported. This year's Rabat festival, which ran from November 7-15, screened two Iranian titles in competition with 'The Last Act' by Tehran-based director Peyman Shahbod and 'Without Permission

(2025)' by Iran-UK filmmaker Hassan Nazer. Iranian producer Elham Nobakht served on the main competition jury, underscoring Tehran's growing footprint in North Africa's increasingly outward-looking cinema scene.

## Iranian short 'Oscar' takes top prize at Jakarta's Madani festival

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian director Ali Asghari seized the best short-film award at the 8th Madani International Film Festival in Jakarta after his drama 'Oscar' outperformed a crowded field of independent entries from across Asia. The Jakarta-based event, one of Southeast Asia's more established showcases for socially minded independent cinema, drew films with strong human-centered themes from several continents, Mehr News Agency reported.

The festival aims to foster "cultural dialogue" and keep a lifeline open for emerging filmmakers who struggle to find screening platforms. Asghari wrote and directed 'Oscar,' produced by Mehdi Ghaemmagham. The film tracks a character who insists, with a mix of desperation and bravado, "I must act in this film because it will save my life." The cast includes Amir Karbalaieizadeh, Parisa Alizadeh, Saba Khorasani, Reza Sakhaeifard, Neda Hosseini, Mohammad Nouhian, Amirhossein Ghelich and Hossein Abbaspour.