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Neighboring countries rush to help battle blaze

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In this photo published by Iranian media on November 22, 2025, two air tankers drop retardant to extinguish a wildfire ravaging a forest outside the city of Chalus in northern Iran.

● IRNA



## Regional alliances open new investment avenues:

**Pezeshkian**

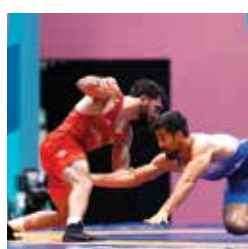
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## Balancing engagement, leverage; Iran's most rational response to IAEA resolution

### INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE



Last week the International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors adopted a resolution against Iran, drafted by the United States and the E3 (France, Germany and Britain). The text calls on Iran to cooperate immediately with the agency, provide detailed information on its stockpile of highly enriched uranium and grant access to nuclear sites damaged during US strike in June. Tehran has dismissed the resolution as "illegal, political and unjustified," describing it as a sign of Western "ill will," adding that it will deliver a proportionate response. Iran traditionally used to answer such resolutions by ramping up enrichment capacity and levels. The situation today, however, is markedly different. Iran's main nuclear facilities were bombed by the United States during the 12-day conflict and

severely damaged, halting all enrichment activity, according to Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. Iran has also sharply reduced its cooperation with the IAEA and has declared the "Cairo Agreement", a new framework for post-war coordination, void following Europe's decision to reinstate UN sanctions.

Against this backdrop, what options does Tehran have? Abed Akbari, an international affairs analyst, told Iran Daily that Iran's choices range from technical engagement to deterrent steps, though a calibrated middle course, combining conditional interaction with the preservation of leverage, is the most logical way to keep things on track.

### IRAN DAILY: What options does Iran have in responding to the IAEA's latest resolution?

AKBARI: Iran faces a set of clearly tiered options, stretching from technical engagement to deterrent measures. At the first level, Tehran can adopt a "conditional cooperation" approach and enter a managed technical

dialogue with the agency, signaling a principled readiness to clarify ambiguities and provide nuclear-material accounting while setting clear boundaries on confidentiality and access. This approach helps keep the political temperature down and serves as an important tool to head off accusations of "non-cooperation".

At the second level, Iran can turn to political and legal instruments: filing an official protest over the politicization of the process, activating multilateral channels and raising legal objections to how the resolution was drafted. This path carries fewer costs and maintains a balance between political resistance and preventing the crisis from spiraling. At the third level lie more confrontational measures, such as limiting certain forms of technical cooperation, suspending specific inspections or stepping up nuclear activities within Iran's legal framework. Although such steps offer deterrent value, they carry a higher political price and could set the stage for more severe tensions in the file.

Overall, blending a phased approach, conditional engagement alongside the preservation of pressure levers, stands out as the most rational course for Iran at this point.

### What consequences might Iran's response have for tensions between Iran and the agency, and between Iran and the West?

The fallout depends entirely on the nature and intensity of Iran's reaction. Should Tehran opt for managed technical cooperation, short-term tensions with the agency would ease, paving the way for more balanced IAEA reporting, which could in turn hold back Europe from pursuing tougher actions and open space for engagement.

Conversely, if Iran responds solely with political rejection of the resolution, friction with the agency, especially the E3, will rise, increasing the likelihood of further resolutions and sustained political pressure, though such a stance might have domestic mobilization value.

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# Iran fighting ferocious fire in UNESCO-listed forests

## Neighboring countries rush to help battle blaze

### National Desk

Operations are underway to extinguish a large fire raging in UNESCO World Heritage-listed Hyrcanian forests in northern Iran for several days as several neighboring countries have expressed readiness to assist Iran. The fire which was allegedly started by hunters in the rocky area of Elit village in northern Mazandaran Province in early November and was initially quelled, reignited on November 15.

Governor General of Mazandaran Province Mehdi Younesi Rostami said on Saturday that a large portion of the fire in the area has been contained so far.

Younesi Rostami said the fire in seven hectares of the forest has been extinguished and only in less than one hectare is still

burning.

Iran's Army and Islamic Revolution Guards Corps have also dispatched helicopters and airtankers to the province.

Vice President for Executive Affairs Mohammad Jafar Ghaempanah wrote Friday on X that Iran has also "requested urgent assistance from friendly countries".

Younesi Rostami said that Turkey has already dispatched a team and Belarus has expressed readiness to help Iran.

Earlier on the day, the Head of the Iranian Environmental Protection Organization Shima Ansari said, "Two specialized water bomber planes, a helicopter, and eight people will be dispatched from Turkey."

"If necessary, we will also seek assistance from Russia," Ansari said.

At least 25 people, who have

been helping to control the fire, have been wounded so far.

The Hyrcanian forests stretch for about 1,000 kilometers along the Iranian coast of the Caspian Sea and into neighboring Azerbaijan. UNESCO recognized the forests as a World Heritage Site in 2019, deeming them unique for both their age – between 25 and 50 million years old – and their varied biodiversity, as home to more than 3,200 species of plants.

UNESCO says on its website the Hyrcanian forests contain "a large number of rare and endemic tree species" and are home to "many relic and endangered plant species."

Hossein Ali Mohammadi, the director general of crisis management for Mazandaran Province, described the operation to extinguish the fire as "one of the most complex in recent years."



The picture shows a view of the fire in the forests of Iran's northern Mazandaran Province which has been going on for several days on November 21, 2025.

● ISNA

## Barzani: Erbil never supported any side against Tehran

### Kurdistan-Iran annual trade hits \$12b

### International Desk

President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Nechirvan Barzani underlined that the semi-autonomous region had never supported any side against Iran, saying that it seeks to be a source of security and stability across West Asia.

"The Islamic Republic (of Iran) has helped us in the past, and we are grateful for all of its support. We follow fundamental principles in our politics and seek to be a source of security and stability in the region," Barzani told the Sixth Middle East Peace and Security 2025 (MEPS) Forum in the region's city of Duhok.



"I believe that there were some misunderstandings between us and Iran. However, we have never assisted any side against them; we have never done such a thing in the past, and we will not do so in the future." He said that it is not in the interest of

the Kurdistan Region to become involved in any issue against Iran. "We have always said — and will continue to say — that we are grateful and appreciative of all the help Iran has given to us."

Referring to different aspects of relations between Tehran and Erbil, Barzani said that Iran is an important neighbor for the Kurdistan Region and based on a fundamental principle, the region always seeks to maintain positive relations with Iran.

"If we consider only the economic aspect, the annual trade exchanges between Iran and the Kurdistan Region amount to about 11 to 12 billion dollars," he said.

## FM says Iran welcomes dialogue with Lebanon



Abbas Araghchi  
● TASNIM

### International Desk

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said that the Islamic Republic welcomes any dialogue aimed at strengthening relations with Lebanon after his Lebanese counterpart invited him for negotiations. "My dear friend, Lebanese Foreign Minister Youssef Rajji, has invited me for negotiations in an interview with MTV Lebanon," Araghchi wrote in Arabic on his X account on Friday.

"We do not interfere in Lebanon's internal affairs, but we welcome any dialogue aimed at advancing bilateral relations between Iran and Lebanon," he added.

Rajji said earlier on Friday that he sees "no taboo" when it comes to the interests of the Lebanese people and called on his Iranian counterpart to hold talks

in a third and neutral country to address alleged issues between Iran and Lebanon. In response, Araghchi noted that there is no need for a third party to facilitate such discussions. "I invite my colleague Youssef to travel to Tehran, and if I am invited to travel to Beirut, I will gladly accept," he stated.

Iran has repeatedly reiterated that it respects Lebanon's sovereignty and does not interfere in the Arab country's domestic affairs.

Back in August, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Ali Larijani, expressed the Islamic Republic's unwavering support for the government and people of Lebanon in various circumstances, dismissing allegations that Iran seeks to interfere in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Larijani also urged the Lebanese politicians to carefully differentiate between friends and foes, noting that Iran never treats its Lebanese allies as "tools," and the Lebanese resistance does not require guidance from others.

Iran has always supported Lebanon's government and its resistance movement Hezbollah against Israel. However, Beirut under US pressure has decided to disarm the resistance movement which has played a key role in countering Israel's threats against Lebanon.

## MP: Parliament drafting plan against IAEA resolution

### International Desk

An Iranian lawmaker said on Saturday that Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee is drafting a plan as a countermeasure against a recent resolution passed at the UN nuclear agency against Iran.

Spokesman for Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Ebrahim Rezaei, told reporters that the committee strongly condemned the resolution as "unlawful", which was approved by the UN nuclear watchdog's 35-nation Board of Governors on Thursday.

The resolution — drafted by France, Germany, Britain and the US — urges Tehran to "without delay" report on its



Ebrahim Rezaei

enriched uranium stockpile and facilities damaged in the June aggression by Israel and the US, while omitting any mention of Iran's longstanding cooperation with the agency.

Rezaei stressed the necessity for a proportionate response from Iran to the resolution.

Iran has already canceled a cooperation agreement recently signed with the International Atomic Energy Agency in Cairo as a goodwill gesture to resolve the nuclear standoff with the West.

"Like the diplomacy which was assaulted by Israel and the US in June, the Cairo Agreement has been killed by the US and the E3," Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on Friday.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmaeil Baqaei condemned the resolution as a "blatant misuse of the international body" to advance Western countries' objectives and said Iran is considering more countermeasures against the illegal resolution.

## Balancing engagement, leverage ...

If Iran moves toward reducing cooperation or ramping up nuclear steps, the impact would quickly show up in agency reports, prompting Europe and the United States to rally broader support for pressure. Even if Russia and China maintain more cautious positions, the overall climate would grow tenser, pushing the file into a more difficult trajectory.

In essence, Iran's choices will determine whether the dossier enters a cycle of mounting tensions and back-to-back resolutions or whether a gradual return to controlled cooperation re-

mains possible.

**How likely is it for Iran's case will to be taken to the UN Security Council in the coming months?**

A referral to the Security Council would only occur if several developments converge: sharply critical agency reports, a degree of Western consensus and a noticeable reduction in Iran's cooperation that leaves little room for a technical defense of the file.

Currently, although Europe has adopted a tougher posture, a swift referral would also require either persuading Russia and China or at least avoiding firm

opposition from them, a scenario that becomes plausible only if Iran-agency tensions reach a point where continuing within the Board of Governors looks untenable.

Over the next few months, the likelihood can be seen as "moderate to low": not imminent, but not removed from Western calculations either. The path depends wholly on Iran-IAEA interaction. If technical reports worsen and cooperation ebbs, the chances of referral rise; but if managed technical engagement takes hold, Europeans will prefer to stick with agency mechanisms and avoid the costly dynamics of the Security Council.

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Mohammad Ali Rajabi  
Cartoonist

CARTOON



# Regional alliances open new investment avenues: *Pezeshkian*

Economy Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Saturday that Tehran's growing ties with BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are creating new opportunities for investors. Speaking at the annual Iran Capital Market Conference in Tehran, Pezeshkian said such diplomatic engagements are strengthening Iran's economic ties with neighboring states and "shaping new opportunities for investors," arguing that regional connectivity is becoming a key driver of growth for Iran's capital markets, according to the presidential website. Iran, long under US sanctions, has in recent years pivoted toward non-Western blocs to bolster trade and investment. It became a full SCO member in July 2023, joined BRICS on January 1, 2024, and on May 15, 2025, implemented a free trade agreement with the EAEU — comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. These moves aim to integrate Iran into alternative economic networks and attract capital despite ongoing financial restrictions. Pezeshkian said the government must take "effective steps" to fa-



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian addresses the annual Iran Capital Market Conference in Tehran, on November 22, 2025. [president.ir](#)

cilitate the work of traders and investors and prevent further budget deficits, noting, "One of the drivers of inflation is policies and programs linked to the government." He acknowledged that such fiscal imbalances have persisted "for many years." He said the administration is working to align revenues and expenditures in the current year's budget, holding regular economic meetings to ensure fiscal discipline and curb unnecessary spending. Last week, the president called on lawmakers to help his government draft a deficit-free budget for the next fiscal year, warning that continued overspending would stoke inflation and derail the country's goals under the Seventh Development Plan (SDP). Iran's year-on-year inflation rate up to the seventh month of the Iranian calendar year (Sept. 23 – Oct. 22) climbed to 38.9 percent, marking a 1.4 percentage-point rise from the previous month, the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) reported on October 28. Pezeshkian also flagged chronic



"shortages in the water, electricity and gas sectors," calling them real and longstanding challenges. He stressed that Iran is seeking to secure the energy required for industry "by any means possible" to keep

manufacturers and producers operating. Part of the effort, he said, involves public outreach and discussions aimed at adjusting and improving the country's energy consumption patterns.

According to the president, Iran has increased electricity generation from solar panels and other renewable sources "200-fold compared to previous periods," and expects that figure to reach "700-fold by the end of

the year." His government has set a goal of installing 30,000 MW of renewables in the next three years to help ease daily power shortage which was around 12,000 MW last summer.

## Six nations sign Istanbul deal to boost China-Europe rail transit via Iran

Economy Desk

Representatives from Iran, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Turkey signed an agreement in Istanbul to expand rail transit along the southern branch of a key transport corridor, a move that positions Iran as a "golden gateway" for container trains traveling from China to Europe. Under the six-party deal, the countries along the route com-



mitted to setting unified and competitive tariffs, speeding up train transit times, reducing ancillary and customs costs, and providing the neces-

sary infrastructure to enable a sharp increase in container train traffic through the corridor's southern branch, which passes through Iran, IRNA re-

ported. Nearly 60 million tons of cargo — transported on about 20,000 container freight trains — moved between China and Europe last year. Officials expect that once the new commitments are implemented, a significant share of that rail transit volume will shift to routes crossing the Islamic Republic of Iran, generating substantial economic and commercial benefits for the country.

## Iran plans contract farming, supply deals to fix trade gap

Economy Desk

Iran plans to increase imports from Afghanistan through contract farming and supply agreements for key agricultural goods, a move aimed at narrowing a huge trade imbalance as Tehran exports \$3 billion annually to Kabul but imports only \$100 million, the head of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce said. Mahmoud Sadat, speaking to ILNA, said Afghanistan lacked significant export capacity in industry and mining,

but held strong potential in agriculture, livestock, and horticulture. "There are good capacities in Afghanistan in agriculture, livestock, and horticulture for Iran," he said. Sadat noted that Iran would increase Afghan imports from needed goods such as cotton, meat, animal feed, sesame, legumes, and similar items. He acknowledged the trade imbalance had long drawn objections from Afghan officials. "Our major problem with Afghanistan is the imbalance between ex-



ports and imports," he said, adding that Afghan authorities consistently urged Iran to buy more from their country. Beyond trade, Sadat said the initiative aims

to "help create employment and boost security in Afghanistan" by integrating its agricultural output into Iran's supply chains through structured, long-term agreements.

## ICT minister pushes regional digital cooperation in meetings at Baku

Economy Desk

Iran's Minister of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Sattar Hashemi, held a series of bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the 2025 World Telecommunication Development Conference in Baku, discussing expanded regional cooperation in digital infrastructure, technical knowledge exchange and implementation of existing agreements. During talks with Isfandiyor Saadullo, head of Tajikistan's Communications Service, Hashemi emphasized Iran's readiness to share expertise in fiber-optic expansion, 5G rollout, and large-scale telecom project management, ISNA reported. He welcomed Tajikistan's request for academic collaboration and proposed joint educational and research programs in telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and information technology. Noting that a comprehensive cooperation memorandum between Iran and Tajikistan was signed a year ago but has yet to enter the operational phase, Hashemi called for "swift action, a clear timeline, and a jointly developed implementation document" to activate agreed-upon projects. In a separate meeting with Pakistan's Minister of Information Technology and Telecommunications, Shaza Fatima Khawaja, Hashemi described full implementa-



tion of the memorandum of understanding inked during Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's recent visit to Islamabad as an "urgent necessity and shared priority." He stressed that Iran and Pakistan, as pivotal players in South and West Asia, must leverage their joint capacities to establish secure and sustainable communication corridors. Hashemi highlighted Iran's experience in developing its National Information Network, expanding fiber coverage, and ensuring network resilience during crises, and proposed enhanced technical knowledge exchange, cross-border optical connectivity, traffic exchange centers, and joint participation in new data transit routes. He also advanced Iran's push for "technology diplomacy" through talks with Kenya's and Algeria's communications ministers. In discussions with Algeria's Post and Telecommunications Minister, Sid Ali Zer-

ouki, the two sides explored cooperation in e-government, digital economy, space industry, cybersecurity, and regional connectivity. Meeting with William Kabogo Githau, Kenya's representative, Hashemi cited Kenya's strategic position in East Africa and its role in the African Telecommunications Union as "a significant opportunity for regional collaboration." He offered to share Iran's advances in e-government integration, unified public service platforms, and nationwide digital business ecosystems through joint training programs and expert forums. Throughout the engagements, Hashemi underscored the need for "systematic follow-up on agreements, rapid operationalization of memoranda, and leveraging shared regional capacities" to strengthen Iran's role in continental digital partnerships.



# Peacebuilding trends of Persian Gulf states



A man walks past the flags of the countries attending the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council summit at Bayan Palace in Kuwait City, Kuwait, on December 5, 2017.



From left, US National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi National Security Advisor Musaad bin Mohammad al-Alban, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiha, and Ukrainian Head of Presidential Office Andriy Yermak hold a meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on March 11, 2025.

By Sharareh Abdolhoseinzadeh  
 Vice director of the Persian Gulf Studies Group at CMES

## OPINION

The efforts of Persian Gulf states to mediate between Iran and the United States are not mere short-term maneuvers. Rather, they reflect a structural transformation in the regional order and the evolving diplomatic identity of these states. Over the past decade, their engagement in conflict resolution has extended beyond the Iran-US context, as each Persian Gulf country seeks a more active role in global peacemaking. The last round of Iran-US negotiations was not simply acts of regional diplomacy but a manifestation of the Persian Gulf states' rising influence in shaping a new world order. In essence, the mechanisms of diplomacy in the Persian Gulf have fundamentally shifted.

The emergence of Persian Gulf nations as active mediators in international crises signals a broader shift in the epicenter of global diplomacy. Whereas in the past, Europe and Western powers dominated peace talks and international negotiations, today, this role is increasingly occupied by states that combine oil wealth, geopolitical positioning, and pragmatic diplomacy.

Oman was the first Persian Gulf state to

step into global diplomacy. It was followed by the UAE and Qatar, and more recently, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a central player. These nations are investing heavily in their international image and soft power to transcend their traditional role as energy suppliers. They seek to become influential actors in global decision-making, not just participants in the market. This transformation is reshaping the outlook of the Middle East and reflects a world that is no longer exclusively Western-centric.

The Persian Gulf monarchies have positioned themselves as credible mediators due to their neutral stance in many conflicts and their wide-ranging diplomatic relations. Hosting negotiations bolsters their international prestige and strengthens their diplomatic leverage, while also helping to reduce regional tensions and safeguard their national security.

Beneath the surface of peace-oriented diplomacy lies a strategic motive: self-preservation. In a region rife with volatility, any escalation can jeopardize investments, tourism, and major development projects. This strategic posture reflects deep concerns over regional instability, which could derail long-term economic visions such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 or the UAE's extensive development initiatives. These countries understand the intrinsic link between regional stability and their economic

security, and thus aim to become key players in managing Middle Eastern tensions.

Iran-Persian Gulf relations have undergone a dramatic shift in the last decade. Unlike the 2015 nuclear negotiations, which unfolded amid tension and Persian Gulf opposition to Iran, today Persian Gulf countries not only support Iran-US dialogue but also help facilitate it. The delivery of a message from US President Donald Trump to Tehran via the UAE marked a turning point.

Persian Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, exert substantial influence on US policymakers through their economic and defense ties. In the Iran-US dialogue, they were employing diplomatic and media tools to persuade Washington that military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities would be futile and dangerously destabilizing. Such attacks would raise oil prices and risk environmental disaster from radiation leakage into Persian Gulf waters, threatening water and food security across the region.

The Persian Gulf states' mediation efforts have extended beyond the Middle East. In the absence or inefficiency of the UN and other international organizations, they are increasingly assuming the role of global intermediaries. This not only underscores the limitations of the UN system but also raises questions about the relevance of its leadership

structure. Qatar, for instance, has hosted peace talks between Congo and rebel forces backed by Rwanda, and in 2022, mediated a peace agreement between Chad's military government and dozens of opposition groups.

Saudi Arabia even hosted indirect talks between the US and Russia amid the Ukraine war, reflecting the diminished role of Europe in conflict mediation and the pivot of global diplomacy toward the southern Persian Gulf.

For smaller Persian Gulf nations and even Saudi Arabia, this reflects a deliberate deployment of soft power. They aim to present themselves not just as regional stakeholders, but as global actors. The rise of Persian Gulf states as active international mediators is clear evidence of a shift in the axis of diplomacy. From regional influence to global ambition, their efforts mark a structural change in their international role.

This is what James Dorsey of Singapore's Middle East Institute calls "soft power with geopolitical ambition". Whether Qatar, Oman, or Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf nations no longer wish to be mere reactors to global developments. They aspire to be shapers of the international agenda — a direct outcome of their strategic recalibration in the global order.

The article was first published in Persian by the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies.



Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (row) takes part in the traditional cleaning of the Kaaba, held as a ceremony, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on August 16, 2022.

ROYAL COURT OF SAUDI ARABIA

explaining and understanding the transition to democracy and socio-political

developments and events. From Giddens' viewpoint, the structure-

In the absence or inefficiency of the UN and other international organizations, Persian Gulf states are increasingly assuming the role of global intermediaries. This not only underscores the limitations of the UN system but also raises questions about the relevance of its leadership structure. Qatar, for instance, has hosted peace talks between Congo and rebel forces backed by Rwanda, and in 2022, mediated a peace agreement between Chad's military government and dozens of opposition groups.

main approaches have generally been proposed to explain the roots and reasons for transition to democracy and the occurrence of democratic developments: agent-centered or agency approaches and structure-centered approaches.

From one perspective, structure refers to institutionalized characteristics of societies or social systems that have formed and expanded over time and space. Structure consists of the rules and resources involved in the creation and articulation of social systems. In institutional analysis, structural or institutionalized characteristics are examined as constantly reproduced characteristics of social systems. The structuralist approach emphasizes the role of constraining or encouraging rules and resources, social conditions and backgrounds, government, and social, cultural, and political structures in understanding types of individual and social behavior, and considers these factors as important and decisive in determining human agents' behavior. From this perspective, the non-occurrence of democracy and democratic developments is analyzed with regard to red lines and socio-political and cultural limitations in the relevant institutionalized structures.

In the agent-based approach, emphasis is placed on the type and nature of the role played by human agents and their behaviors, as well as the nature of their interactions with each other, with the public, and with the government in explaining and understanding the transition to democracy and socio-political transformations. In general, this approach holds that although actors and social forces emerge from structural transformations, such changes do not automatically lead to democratic transformations without the continuous role-playing, persistence, and sacrifices of civil actors and social forces. To understand the complexity of the relationship between economic transformations and democratization processes in the Persian Gulf countries, this article utilizes a combined theoretical framework incorporating both democratic transition theory and Giddens' structuration theory. Within the rentier states of this region, the political development literature presents two distinct analytical paths. On one hand, structural analysis guides us toward examining the entrenched institutional characteristics that have evolved over decades in these societies' socio-political fabric. These structures, including tribal-based political systems, mono-product economies reliant on oil, specific patterns of rent distribution, and authoritarian political cultures, simultaneously function as both restrictive rules and facilitators of political behaviors. Within this framework, the obstacles to democratization must be sought in the

rentier nature of governments, traditional tribal structures, specific legitimacy patterns, and regional security arrangements, all of which form an intricate network shaping the political landscape of these societies.

Conversely, the agent-based approach highlights the dynamic and transformative role of social forces. This perspective illustrates how reformist elites, emerging middle classes, youth movements, and civil groups, each in their own way, engage with seemingly rigid structures to enable gradual change. The experiences of countries in the region demonstrate that while these social actors originate from the very same traditional structures, their persistence and advocacy can slowly reshape political equations. In the particular context of the southern Persian Gulf states, these actors, fully aware of existing structural limitations, seek pathways to redefine the relationship between the state and society. In this regard, recent economic transformations in some of these countries — primarily framed within economic diversification programs and efforts to reduce oil dependency — have impacted both structures and actors, injecting new dynamism into this reciprocal relationship.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia unveiled its economic, political, and social reform agenda under the Vision 2030 framework. Certain technocrats, spearheaded by Mohammed bin Salman, presented this document as a means to extricate the country from its mono-product economy and its resulting constraints. Given the scale of the reforms and the inclusion of fundamental and disruptive initiatives, Vision 2030 represents a revolutionary agenda in its own right. Its aim is to drive struc-



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia (right) walks with the Google co-founder Sergey Brin (left) at Google headquarters in Mountain View, California, the US, on April 5, 2018.

SAUDI ROYAL PALACE

tural economic change by reducing oil dependency, diversifying the economy, and empowering the private sector. Alongside this vision, the government committed to enhancing transparency, governmental accountability, and greater civic participation in economic and social domains. However, while the vision primarily focuses on economic development with limited attention to political dimensions, subsequent economic and social reforms have facilitated increased public liberties and extended new rights to women. At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces significant domestic political challenges, including intra-royal power struggles, the state's approach to dissent and reformist movements, and the growing opposition inside and outside the country.

The structural changes envisioned in Vision 2030 could potentially reconfigure the relationship between the government and its citizens, fostering greater openness in economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. In the long run, these changes might pave the way for a reconstruction of the political system and possibly a successful democratic transition. However, the question remains: Can Vision 2030 truly set Saudi Arabia on the path to democratization?

Enacted following the 2014 crisis, Vision 2030 aims at structural economic transformation in Saudi Arabia. While the vision promises transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and a degree of economic and social liberalization — elements that could potentially restructure state-citizen relations and bring long-term political change — the pace of implementation has been slow despite noticeable progress. Economic reforms in Saudi Arabia pursue various political ob-

jectives. Chief among these is the attempt to curb political crises, establish new legitimacy domestically and internationally based on economic development and openness, and rehabilitate the regime's global image — particularly after the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. In reality, however, these reforms are primarily designed to reinforce the absolute monarchy rather than democratic development. The program has concentrated power in the hands of King Salman and the Crown Prince, sidelining royal factions that previously controlled different centers of influence and replacing traditional elites loyal to King Abdullah with new ones aligned with the current leadership. As a result, Mohammed bin Salman's policies and economic reforms do not ultimately lead to democratization.

From the perspective of Giddens' structuration theory, Vision 2030 does not strictly adhere to agent-based or structure-based approaches in democratization. Structurally, democracy is understood as the institutionalized characteristics of societies or political systems that have evolved over time and space. Meanwhile, the agency-centered transition theory emphasizes the role of actors, their interactions, and engagement with the government and the public in shaping democratic transformations. However, Vision 2030 is fundamentally an economic agenda and does not incorporate structured democratic transition elements such as elections, systemic changes, or an expanded parliamentary role.

The experience of Arab Persian Gulf countries shows that while rapid economic development can occur without democracy — as seen in technocratic governance and massive investments in the UAE and Saudi Arabia — this model faces fundamental challenges. This development model, which hinges on oil revenues and centralized governance, has succeeded in establishing short-term infrastructure and relative welfare. Yet, its long-term sustainability remains in question due to oil dependency, structural inequalities, and vulnerability to crises. The core issue is that within such a framework, citizens remain dependent rather than autonomous actors in development, entirely reliant on the state for their well-being.

Ultimately, while economic indicators may improve, genuine and sustainable development requires accountable institutions, popular capacity-building, and sufficient political space for innovation — elements that Persian Gulf states will struggle with in the long run.

The article was first published in Persian by the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies.



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## Notes on artificial intelligence in Persian Gulf

By Arshin Adib-Moghaddam  
 Professor at SOAS University of London

## OPINION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a central force in shaping the future of industries, economies, and governance systems around the world. The Persian Gulf, a region known for its vast oil reserves and geopolitical importance, is increasingly embracing AI as part of its broader efforts to diversify economies and prepare for the post-oil future. While the region has traditionally relied on energy exports to fuel its growth, the rapid advancement of AI technologies, if screened for ethical blind spots, may present new opportunities. From government initiatives and smart city projects to the integration of AI in healthcare and finance, the Persian Gulf is undergoing a technological transformation that could reshape its future. A critical approach to these emergent AI industries couched in a human-centric and inclusive approach may open up a new foray of the region into the current debates about ethical application of AI systems. The Persian Gulf's reliance on oil and gas



A visitor communicates with a "conversational robot" during the third edition of the Global AI Summit (right) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on September 12, 2024.

XINHUA

exports has made it vulnerable to global energy market fluctuations. As such, AI has already been recognized as a key component in economic diversification efforts across the region. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have been actively investing in AI to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels and build knowledge-based economies.

The UAE established the position of Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence in 2017, highlighting the country's commitment to becoming a global leader in AI. Through initiatives like the "AI Strategy 2031", the UAE aims to integrate AI across various sectors, including government

services, healthcare, and transportation. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" plan emphasizes the role of emerging technologies, including AI, in driving sustainable economic growth. Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in research and development to foster AI innovation, with projects ranging from autonomous vehicles to AI-powered healthcare systems.

Dubai's ambition to become the world's first fully smart city is a prime example of AI's role in reshaping urban living. The Dubai Smart City initiative, which was launched in 2013, utilizes AI to optimize transportation systems, reduce traffic congestion, and improve public

safety. AI-powered surveillance systems, traffic management algorithms, and predictive analytics help make the city more livable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

In Iran, the country's growing AI sector is aided and abetted by a strong academic foundation and research culture. Universities such as Sharif University of Technology, the University of Tehran, and Amirkabir University of Technology (and others) actively contribute to AI research and education, as Iranian research institutions rank highly in the region in terms of the number and quality of AI-related scientific publications. Despite the promising potential of AI, the Persian Gulf region faces several challenges in its integration. More attention has to be given to the nefarious effects of AI systems, for instance, on questions of gender, race, and class, to build systems that are truly effective in serving social change and socio-economic development.

Another major issue is the need for a skilled workforce capable of developing and managing AI systems. While the region has made substantial investments in AI infrastructure, there is a shortage of trained professionals in fields such as machine learning, data science, and ro-

botics, and a dearth in sponsoring critical AI studies as an emergent theory to interrogate the dangers of AI for society and humanity in general. To address this, Persian Gulf countries need to invest in educational initiatives and partnerships with global universities to build a robust AI talent pool.

Another independent challenge is the ethical and regulatory framework surrounding AI technologies. The rapid pace of AI development has outpaced the establishment of comprehensive regulations to govern its use. Issues related to data privacy, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and job displacement need to be addressed to ensure that AI is deployed in a way that benefits society while minimizing potential harms. Persian Gulf countries must adopt ethical AI frameworks that prioritize fairness, transparency, and accountability to ensure public trust in AI systems. Whilst AI is playing an integral role in the region's development, challenges related to workforce readiness, ethical concerns, and regulation must be addressed to ensure the responsible deployment of AI technologies.

The article was first published in Persian by the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies.



# Peacebuilding trends of Persian Gulf states



A man walks past the flags of the countries attending the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council summit at Bayan Palace in Kuwait City, Kuwait, on December 5, 2017.

AFP



From left, US National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi National Security Advisor Musaad bin Mohammad al-Alban, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiha, and Ukrainian Head of Presidential Office Andriy Yermak hold a meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on March 11, 2025.

AFP

By Sharareh Abdolhoseinzadeh  
Vice director of the Persian Gulf Studies Group at CMES

## OPINION

The efforts of Persian Gulf states to mediate between Iran and the United States are not mere short-term maneuvers. Rather, they reflect a structural transformation in the regional order and the evolving diplomatic identity of these states. Over the past decade, their engagement in conflict resolution has extended beyond the Iran-US context, as each Persian Gulf country seeks a more active role in global peacemaking. The last round of Iran-US negotiations was not simply acts of regional diplomacy but a manifestation of the Persian Gulf states' rising influence in shaping a new world order. In essence, the mechanisms of diplomacy in the Persian Gulf have fundamentally shifted.

The emergence of Persian Gulf nations as active mediators in international crises signals a broader shift in the epicenter of global diplomacy. Whereas in the past, Europe and Western powers dominated peace talks and international negotiations, today, this role is increasingly occupied by states that combine oil wealth, geopolitical positioning, and pragmatic diplomacy.

Oman was the first Persian Gulf state to

step into global diplomacy. It was followed by the UAE and Qatar, and more recently, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a central player. These nations are investing heavily in their international image and soft power to transcend their traditional role as energy suppliers. They seek to become influential actors in global decision-making, not just participants in the market. This transformation is reshaping the outlook of the Middle East and reflects a world that is no longer exclusively Western-centric.

The Persian Gulf monarchies have positioned themselves as credible mediators due to their neutral stance in many conflicts and their wide-ranging diplomatic relations. Hosting negotiations bolsters their international prestige and strengthens their diplomatic leverage, while also helping to reduce regional tensions and safeguard their national security.

Beneath the surface of peace-orient-

ed diplomacy lies a strategic motive: self-preservation. In a region rife with volatility, any escalation can jeopardize investments, tourism, and major development projects. This strategic posture reflects deep concerns over regional instability, which could derail long-term economic visions such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 or the UAE's extensive development initiatives. These countries understand the intrinsic link between regional stability and their economic

security, and thus aim to become key players in managing Middle Eastern tensions.

Iran-Persian Gulf relations have undergone a dramatic shift in the last decade. Unlike the 2015 nuclear negotiations, which unfolded amid tension and Persian Gulf opposition to Iran, today Persian Gulf countries not only support Iran-US dialogue but also help facilitate it. The delivery of a message from US President Donald Trump to Tehran via the UAE marked a turning point.

Persian Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, exert substantial influence on US policymakers through their economic and defense ties. In the Iran-US dialogue, they were employing diplomatic and media tools to persuade Washington that military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities would be futile and dangerously destabilizing. Such attacks would raise oil prices and risk environmental disaster from radiation leakage into Persian Gulf waters, threatening water and food security across the region.

The Persian Gulf states' mediation efforts have extended beyond the Middle East. In the absence or inefficiency of the UN and other international organizations, they are increasingly assuming the role of global intermediaries. This not only underscores the limitations of the UN system but also raises questions about the relevance of its leadership

structure. Qatar, for instance, has hosted peace talks between Congo and rebel forces backed by Rwanda, and in 2022, mediated a peace agreement between Chad's military government and dozens of opposition groups.

Saudi Arabia even hosted indirect talks between the US and Russia amid the Ukraine war, reflecting the diminished role of Europe in conflict mediation and the pivot of global diplomacy toward the southern Persian Gulf.

For smaller Persian Gulf nations and even Saudi Arabia, this reflects a deliberate deployment of soft power. They aim to present themselves not just as regional stakeholders, but as global actors. The rise of Persian Gulf states as active international mediators is clear evidence of a shift in the axis of diplomacy. From regional influence to global ambition, their efforts mark a structural change in their international role.

This is what James Dorsey of Singapore's Middle East Institute calls "soft power with geopolitical ambition". Whether Qatar, Oman, or Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf nations no longer wish to be mere reactors to global developments. They aspire to be shapers of the international agenda — a direct outcome of their strategic recalibration in the global order.

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Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (row) takes part in the traditional cleaning of the Kaaba, held as a ceremony, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on August 16, 2022.

ROYAL COURT OF SAUDI ARABIA

explaining and understanding the transition to democracy and socio-political

developments and events. From Giddens' viewpoint, the structure-



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main approaches have generally been proposed to explain the roots and reasons for transition to democracy and the occurrence of democratic developments: agent-centered or agency approaches and structure-centered approaches.

From one perspective, structure refers to institutionalized characteristics of societies or social systems that have formed and expanded over time and space. Structure consists of the rules and resources involved in the creation and articulation of social systems. In institutional analysis, structural or institutionalized characteristics are examined as constantly reproduced characteristics of social systems. The structuralist approach emphasizes the role of constraining or encouraging rules and resources, social conditions and backgrounds, government, and social, cultural, and political structures in understanding types of individual and social behavior, and considers these factors as important and decisive in determining human agents' behavior. From this perspective, the non-occurrence of democracy and democratic developments is analyzed with regard to red lines and socio-political and cultural limitations in the relevant institutionalized structures.

In the agent-based approach, emphasis is placed on the type and nature of the role played by human agents and their behaviors, as well as the nature of their interactions with each other, with the public, and with the government in explaining and understanding the transition to democracy and socio-political transformations. In general, this approach holds that although actors and social forces emerge from structural transformations, such changes do not automatically lead to democratic transformations without the continuous role-playing, persistence, and sacrifices of civil actors and social forces. To understand the complexity of the relationship between economic transformations and democratization processes in the Persian Gulf countries, this article utilizes a combined theoretical framework incorporating both democratic transition theory and Giddens' structuration theory. Within the rentier states of this region, the political development literature presents two distinct analytical guides. On one hand, structural analysis guides us toward examining the entrenched institutional characteristics that have evolved over decades in these societies' socio-political fabric. These structures, including tribal-based political systems, mono-product economies reliant on oil, specific patterns of rent distribution, and authoritarian political cultures, simultaneously function as both restrictive rules and facilitators of political behaviors. Within this framework, the obstacles to democratization must be sought in the

rentier nature of governments, traditional tribal structures, specific legitimacy patterns, and regional security arrangements, all of which form an intricate network shaping the political landscape of these societies.

Conversely, the agent-based approach highlights the dynamic and transformative role of social forces. This perspective illustrates how reformist elites, emerging middle classes, youth movements, and civil groups, each in their own way, engage with seemingly rigid structures to enable gradual change. The experiences of countries in the region demonstrate that while these social actors originate from the very same traditional structures, their persistence and advocacy can slowly reshape political equations. In the particular context of the southern Persian Gulf states, these actors, fully aware of existing structural limitations, seek pathways to redefine the relationship between the state and society. In this regard, recent economic transformations in some of these countries — primarily framed within economic diversification programs and efforts to reduce oil dependency — have impacted both structures and actors, injecting new dynamism into this reciprocal relationship.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia unveiled its economic, political, and social reform agenda under the Vision 2030 framework. Certain technocrats, spearheaded by Mohammed bin Salman, presented this document as a means to extricate the country from its mono-product economy and its resulting constraints. Given the scale of the reforms and the inclusion of fundamental and disruptive initiatives, Vision 2030 represents a revolutionary agenda in its own right. Its aim is to drive struc-



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia (right) walks with the Google co-founder Sergey Brin (left) at Google headquarters in Mountain View, California, the US, on April 5, 2018.

SAUDI ROYAL PALACE

tural economic change by reducing oil dependency, diversifying the economy, and empowering the private sector. Alongside this vision, the government committed to enhancing transparency, governmental accountability, and greater civic participation in economic and social domains. However, while the vision primarily focuses on economic development with limited attention to political dimensions, subsequent economic and social reforms have facilitated increased public liberties and extended new rights to women. At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces significant domestic political challenges, including intra-royal power struggles, the state's approach to dissent and reformist movements, and the growing opposition inside and outside the country.

The structural changes envisioned in Vision 2030 could potentially reconfigure the relationship between the government and its citizens, fostering greater openness in economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. In the long run, these changes might pave the way for a reconstruction of the political system and possibly a successful democratic transition. However, the question remains: Can Vision 2030 truly set Saudi Arabia on the path to democratization?

Enacted following the 2014 crisis, Vision 2030 aims at structural economic transformation in Saudi Arabia. While the vision promises transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and a degree of economic and social liberalization — elements that could potentially restructure state-citizen relations and bring long-term political change — the pace of implementation has been slow despite noticeable progress. Economic reforms in Saudi Arabia pursue various political ob-

jectives. Chief among these is the attempt to curb political crises, establish new legitimacy domestically and internationally based on economic development and openness, and rehabilitate the regime's global image — particularly after the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. In reality, however, these reforms are primarily designed to reinforce the absolute monarchy rather than democratic development. The program has concentrated power in the hands of King Salman and the Crown Prince, sidelining royal factions that previously controlled different centers of influence and replacing traditional elites loyal to King Abdullah with new ones aligned with the current leadership. As a result, Mohammed bin Salman's policies and economic reforms do not ultimately lead to democratization.

From the perspective of Giddens' structuration theory, Vision 2030 does not strictly adhere to agent-based or structure-based approaches in democratization. Structurally, democracy is understood as the institutionalized characteristics of societies or political systems that have evolved over time and space. Meanwhile, the agency-centered transition theory emphasizes the role of actors, their interactions, and engagement with the government and the public in shaping democratic transformations. However, Vision 2030 is fundamentally an economic agenda and does not incorporate structured democratic transition elements such as elections, systemic changes, or an expanded parliamentary role.

The experience of Arab Persian Gulf countries shows that while rapid economic development can occur without democracy — as seen in technocratic governance and massive investments in the UAE and Saudi Arabia — this model faces fundamental challenges. This development model, which hinges on oil revenues and centralized governance, has succeeded in establishing short-term infrastructure and relative welfare. Yet, its long-term sustainability remains in question due to oil dependency, structural inequalities, and vulnerability to crises. The core issue is that within such a framework, citizens remain dependent rather than autonomous actors in development, entirely reliant on the state for their well-being.

Ultimately, while economic indicators may improve, genuine and sustainable development requires accountable institutions, popular capacity-building, and sufficient political space for innovation — elements that Persian Gulf states will struggle with in the long run.

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## Development, democratic transition in Persian Gulf

### A sustainable model or historical impasse?

By Mohammadreza Mohammadi  
Researcher at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies

## OPINION

The ongoing debate about the relationship between development and democracy finds particularly noteworthy case studies in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf region. These countries present these two concepts in a distinct and sometimes contradictory manner. On one hand, their accelerated development model and oil-based economies have brought relative welfare and political stability to their citizens despite the absence of democratic institutions. On the other hand, critics of this model argue that real, sustainable development remains incomplete and fragile without the political participation of the people and governmental accountability.

The fundamental question is: does the path of development necessarily lead to a democratic transition? Or are there alternative paths to progress under spe-

cific circumstances? Some argue that in societies with tribal structures and rentier economies, democracy may lead to instability and threaten developmental achievements. Others believe that without political freedoms and transparent institutions, development will ultimately reach an impasse in the long run and fuel latent discontent. In this analysis, we attempt to objectively examine these contradictions and use Anthony Giddens' theory to study both compatibility and conflict approaches regarding the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Subsequently, by examining Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 document, we will look at the status of democratic transition in this country under Mohammed bin Salman's reforms.

From a structural perspective, democracy refers to institutionalized characteristics of societies or social systems that have formed and expanded over time and space. The agency approach to democratic transition emphasizes and focuses on the nature of the role played by human actors/agents and their behavior, as well as their interactions with each other, with the people, and with the government in



Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (row) takes part in the traditional cleaning of the Kaaba, held as a ceremony, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on August 16, 2022.

ROYAL COURT OF SAUDI ARABIA

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alist approach emphasizes the role of constraining or encouraging rules and resources, social contexts and backgrounds, government, and social, cultural, and political structures in understanding types of individual and social behavior. These factors are considered important and decisive in determining human agents' behavior. From this perspective, the non-occurrence of democracy and democratic developments is analyzed with regard to red lines and socio-political and cultural limitations in the relevant institutionalized structures. Accordingly, each society develops differently from others, and its political participation is based on its own criteria, norms, and historical conditions. Some of these societies move toward democratic standards more slowly, while others progress faster. However, it appears that the countries of the southern Persian Gulf face numerous serious obstacles in this path.

To examine the relationship between economic development and democratization in rentier states, this analysis uses Giddens' theory. In the theoretical literature of political development, two

## Notes on artificial intelligence in Persian Gulf

By Arshin Adib-Moghaddam  
Professor at SOAS University of London

## OPINION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a central force in shaping the future of industries, economies, and governance systems around the world. The Persian Gulf, a region known for its vast oil reserves and geopolitical importance, is increasingly embracing AI as part of its broader efforts to diversify economies and prepare for the post-oil future. While the region has traditionally relied on energy exports to fuel its growth, the rapid advancement of AI technologies, if screened for ethical blind spots, may present new opportunities. From government initiatives and smart city projects to the integration of AI in healthcare and finance, the Persian Gulf is undergoing a technological transformation that could reshape its future. A critical approach to these emergent AI industries couched in a human-centric and inclusive approach may open up a new foray of the region into the current debates about ethical application of AI systems. The Persian Gulf's reliance on oil and gas



A visitor communicates with a "conversational robot" during the third edition of the Global AI Summit (open) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on September 12, 2024.

XINHUA

exports has made it vulnerable to global energy market fluctuations. As such, AI has already been recognized as a key component in economic diversification efforts across the region. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have been actively investing in AI to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels and build knowledge-based economies.

The UAE established the position of Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence in 2017, highlighting the country's commitment to becoming a global leader in AI. Through initiatives like the "AI Strategy 2031", the UAE aims to integrate AI across various sectors, including government

services, healthcare, and transportation. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" plan emphasizes the role of emerging technologies, including AI, in driving sustainable economic growth. Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in research and development to foster AI innovation, with projects ranging from autonomous vehicles to AI-powered healthcare systems.

Dubai's ambition to become the world's first fully smart city is a prime example of AI's role in reshaping urban living. The Dubai Smart City initiative, which was launched in 2013, utilizes AI to optimize transportation systems, reduce traffic congestion, and improve public

safety. AI-powered surveillance systems, traffic management algorithms, and predictive analytics help make the city more livable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

In Iran, the country's growing AI sector is aided and abetted by a strong academic foundation and research culture. Universities such as Sharif University of Technology, the University of Tehran, and Amirkabir University of Technology (and others) actively contribute to AI research and education, as Iranian research institutions rank highly in the region in terms of the number and quality of AI-related scientific publications. Despite the promising potential of AI, the Persian Gulf region faces several challenges in its integration. More attention has to be given to the nefarious effects of AI systems, for instance, on questions of gender, race, and class, to build systems that are truly effective in serving social change and socio-economic development.

Another major issue is the need for a skilled workforce capable of developing and managing AI systems. While the region has made substantial investments in AI infrastructure, there is a shortage of trained professionals in fields such as machine learning, data science, and ro-

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Another independent challenge is the ethical and regulatory framework surrounding AI technologies. The rapid pace of AI development has outpaced the establishment of comprehensive regulations to govern its use. Issues related to data privacy, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and job displacement need to be addressed to ensure that AI is deployed in a way that benefits society while minimizing potential harms. Persian Gulf countries must adopt ethical AI frameworks that prioritize fairness, transparency, and accountability to ensure public trust in AI systems. Whilst AI is playing an integral role in the region's development, challenges related to workforce readiness, ethical concerns, and regulation must be addressed to ensure the responsible deployment of AI technologies.

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# Riyadh 2025 Islamic Solidarity Games: Wrestling, para powerlifting heroics round out Iran's 29-gold haul



Iranian freestyle wrestler Younes Emami (blue) reaches for the leg of Azerbaijan's Aghanazar Novruzov during the 74kg final at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 21, 2025.  
● KADIR CALISKAN/UWW



Iranian para powerlifter Ruhollah Rostami is seen ahead of an attempt at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 21, 2025.  
● ISG

## Sports Desk

The final day of the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh saw Iranian athletes claim four gold medals in wrestling and para powerlifting, as the country capped the multi-sport event with 89 medals, including 29 golds. Amirhossein Zare', Amirali Azarpira, and Younes Emami captured the ultimate prize in their respective freestyle classes, while Kamran Qasempour settled for the 86kg bronze on Friday, steering Iran to a clean sweep of 12 wrestling medals in Riyadh. Zare', who won the third senior world gold of his career in September, dominated the 125kg division, outscoring his opponents 28-0 across three bouts. Standing between Zare' and the

gold in the final was Bahrain's Russian-born Shamil Sharipov, who was desperate to avenge his 7-3 semifinal loss to the Iranian at the World Championships, having earlier defeated world silver medalist Giorgi Meshvildishvili of Azerbaijan 7-6 in the semifinals. The Iranian superheavyweight, however, had other ideas, as he built on his trademark stepouts to win by technical superiority (10-0) and deliver the country's final gold medal in Riyadh. In the 97kg event, a rematch of the world semifinal between Azarpira and Olympic champion Akhmed Tazhudinov was denied by Kazakhstani former world champion Rizabek Aitmukhan, who pulled off a sensational 14-3 victory over the Bahraini to set up a final showdown with the Iranian.

Azarpira was clearly the better wrestler in the final, blanking Aitmukhan 5-0 with a masterclass in defense to claim the gold, having secured three technical superiority wins without conceding a single point en route to the final. Emami enjoyed his best tournament in some time, as the two-time world bronze medalist came from behind to edge 2024 world champion Nurkozha Kaipanov of Kazakhstan 6-5 in a thrilling last-four clash, before coming out on top against Azerbaijan's Aghanazar Novruzov in the 74kg final. Emami scored a takedown to take a 2-0 lead against Novruzov and then pushed the Azerbaijani wrestler out of bounds twice before the break. Emami began the second period aggressively, and Novruzov was called passive. He failed to

score in the 30-second period, and Emami added another point to lead 5-0, a scoreline that held until the final whistle. Two-time world champion Qasempour was the clear favorite for the 86kg gold, but the Iranian suffered a first-round heartbreak against Azerbaijan's Arsenii Dzhioev, who went on to defeat Bahrain's Khidir Saipudinov 5-1 in the final. Qasempour relinquished a 3-0 lead as Dzhioev responded with two takedowns and an additional point for the Iranian's passivity to win the bout 5-3. Qasempour still managed to bounce back from the setback, marching past Algeria's Fateh Benferdjallah (11-0) and Tajikistan's Magomet Evloev (8-0) to claim the consolation prize, adding it to the world bronze

he won in September.

## Rostami on top

Rostami said he had to step up his training efforts to secure the gold in a tight men's para powerlifting event, which featured 10 contestants across six different weight categories. Having registered 225kg and 230kg in his first two attempts, the Iranian lifted 235kg on his final try to total 151.297 points, edging out Iraq's Rasool Mohsin (150.303) for the top spot. "It was a really tough competition because it came less than a month after the World Championships, and I didn't have enough time to recover and reach the fitness level I had in mind," Rostami said, adding, "I had to train through a lot of pain and could not exceed 230kg over the past

month, but I'm grateful that I managed it today to win this precious medal." "This competition followed a new format that wasn't based on weight classes. It was a points-based system where your body weight and the record you lifted were calculated into a score, which decided the final outcome. It was an interesting experience," added the former world champion. Elsewhere in the Games, Yassamin Nazari won the final Iranian women's medal, claiming an impressive bronze in ju-jitsu. After finishing second in the -52kg Pool B, Nazari fell in the last-four clash against Jordan's Asma Alhossani but bounced back to defeat Algeria's Hammoumi Maissaa and secure a podium finish in her international debut.

## 25th Summer Deaflympics: Greco-Roman glory as Iran claims nine medals on Day 7

### Sports Desk

Greco-Roman wrestlers Abuzar Rabizadeh and Meysam Qabshah-Dezfuli headlined Iran's medal hunt on Day 7 of the Tokyo Summer Deaflympics by capturing gold in their respective events on Saturday. Having defeated Azerbaijan's Islam Rzaev by technical superiority in the semifinals, Rabizadeh was awarded the 97kg gold after Ukraine's Andrii Kosov withdrew from the final

due to injury. Earlier in the day, Qabshah-Dezfuli overcame Russian and Ukrainian opponents to reach the 87kg showdown, before outmuscling Armenia's Narek Hamlet Nikoghosyan 10-2 for the ultimate prize. Mahdi Bakhshi, meanwhile, had to settle for silver in the 67kg category following an 11-1 defeat against Kazakhstan's Andrey

Samarin in the final. Iran added more Greco-Roman medals as Sadeq Abolvafaei (60kg), Mohammad Zaratpisheh (77kg), and Mohammadreza Sha'bani (130kg) all secured a consolation bronze. Elsewhere at the multi-sport event, Morteza Rezasefat claimed silver in the men's poomsae in taekwondo, with Maryam Khodabandeh matching the feat in the women's competition.

The individual silvers

marked the second medal for the two Iranians, after they had teamed up to win bronze in the mixed event earlier on Saturday. Saturday's results took Iran's medal count to 15 in Tokyo. Ali Salahshour (-66kg), Hossein Allahkarimi (-90kg), and Masoud Rastegar (+100kg) secured a third-place finish in the men's judo team event, thanks to a 2-0 victory over Türkiye, having also claimed bronze in their respective weight classes. Iranian shooter Mahla Samiei finished third in the women's 10m air pistol competition and was also part of the duo – alongside Bijan Ghaffari – that settled for bronze in the mixed pair event. 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.

## Women's Kabaddi World Cup 2025: Iran beats Nepal to set up last-four clash with India

### Sports Desk

Iran progressed to the Women's Kabaddi World Cup semifinals with a 39-11 victory over Nepal in its final Group B outing in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on Saturday. Standing between the Iranian women and a place in the final will be kabaddi powerhouse India, with the two teams meeting today in a rematch of the inaugural 2012 final, which India won. India defeated Uganda 51-16 on

Friday to complete a clean sweep of four victories in Group A. Iran began its campaign with a 55-11 win against Poland, followed by victories over Kenya (42-10) and Zanzibar (51-15), before suffering a 31-21 setback to Chinese Taipei in its penultimate group game on Thursday. The other semifinal will see Chinese Taipei face Bangladesh for a spot in Sunday's showdown at the Shaheed Suhrawardi Indoor Stadium.

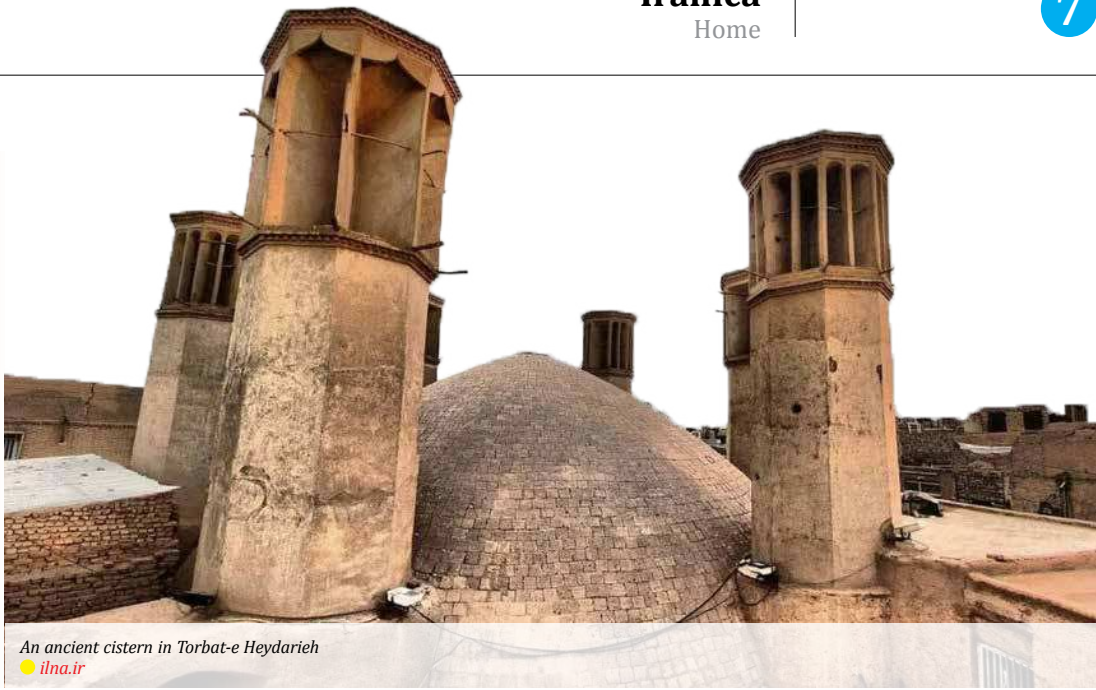


Greco-Roman wrestler Abuzar Rabizadeh celebrates with the Iranian flag after winning the 97kg gold at the 25th Summer Deaflympics in Tokyo, Japan, on November 22, 2025.  
● MNA





# Windcatchers preserve Khorasan Razavi's desert heritage



An ancient cistern in Torbat-e Heydarieh  
● ilna.ir

## Iranica Desk

The hot, arid climate of eastern Iran — especially across Khorasan Razavi Province — has long tested human ingenuity. Facing extreme temperature swings, low humidity, and relentless sunlight, Iranian architects drew on a deep understanding of air currents, solar angles, and the thermal properties of local materials to develop clever climatic solutions. Among these, the windcatcher stands out as a striking example. Experts in climatic architecture describe windcatchers as passive ventilation systems. By leveraging differences in air pressure at varying heights, they create a constant flow of fresh air while cooling indoor spaces through natural evaporation, ISNA wrote. In Khorasan Razavi Province, the importance of windcatchers is magnified by the region's diverse climate. From the hot, dry plains of Gonabad to the semi-desert highlands of Torbat-e Heydarieh, variations in wind, humidity, and sunlight have produced a variety of windcatcher designs. More than just a tool for thermal comfort, these structures reflect a respect for nature and energy efficiency — requiring no electricity and generating zero pollution. Ehsan Fakhraei, a researcher in architecture and the restoration of historical buildings, said that from a modern scientific perspective, the study of windcatchers is no longer purely historical; they are now valued as models of sustainable, climate-responsive design. Emphasizing the importance of understanding and preserving windcatchers in Iran's desert regions, he added, "Windcatchers are symbols of a civilization in harmony with nature. What we see today in Yazd, Gonabad, Tabas, Kerman, and other desert cities continues the legacy of a smart architectural heritage that has developed in Iran over thousands of years." He noted that while there are no

precise historical records pinpointing the first windcatchers, medieval travelogues indicate that these structures were most concentrated in the hot, arid cities of eastern and southern Iran. Across all these regions, windcatchers addressed the challenges of heat, dryness, and water scarcity, and together with qanats and domed houses, formed a triangular foundation of Iran's climatic civilization. He explained that three elements—the qanat, the windcatcher, and domed houses — developed simultaneously in eastern Iran. The qanat supplied water, the windcatcher cooled the air, and the domed shape of the houses effectively prevented heat from accumulating indoors. He added, "In Khorasan Razavi, the coexistence of these three elements can still be seen in the old neighborhoods of Gonabad or the southern areas of Kashmar. There are still houses where the windcatcher rises above the pool house and draws water from an underground qanat. These structures are both functional and aesthetically significant, as they showcase the precise combination of geometry and performance." Fakhraei expressed concern over the current state of windcatchers in Khorasan Razavi, "In recent years, rapid modern construc-

tion has led to the destruction of many old windcatchers, while others have been abandoned without proper restoration. Only a handful remain, mostly in Gonabad and Bejestan. Material erosion, moisture infiltration, and a lack of careful preservation pose serious threats to these historic structures." Scientific and cultural projects must be launched to preserve this heritage. Restoring windcatchers is not merely a cosmetic effort; it is about safeguarding a part of Iran's climatic identity. Ancient architects, without any modern technology, developed fully sustainable solutions for living in harsh conditions. Today, as the world faces energy crises and global warming, studying the function of windcatchers can inspire new designs for modern hot-climate cities. The architecture expert emphasized, "Universities and architecture schools should incorporate lessons on regional climatic architecture into their curricula, including studies of windcatchers in Khorasan Razavi. Today, our youth are more familiar with concrete and glass structures but know little about how Iran's vernacular architecture interacted with the climate. Reviving this knowledge could lead to homes that are both beautiful and environmentally adapted."

He also noted, "Particularly in the southern cities of Khorasan Razavi, windcatchers are not just technical devices — they are part of the cultural landscape. In some neighborhoods, windcatchers were positioned in different directions to create a balanced visual rhythm of vertical lines on the horizon. For this reason, windcatchers served not only a functional role but also contributed to the identity of the cities." Windcatchers are not merely historical relics. They are messengers of a lifestyle in harmony with nature — a way of thinking that should be revived in contemporary Iranian architecture. Preserving and restoring the windcatchers of Khorasan Razavi Province can be a step toward bringing the local spirit back to cities that have drifted away from their historical identity in recent years. Abolqasem Rashidi, a veteran architect, explained that in eastern Iran — particularly in the central and southern parts of Khorasan Razavi — windcatchers were designed as structures oriented and shaped according to the direction and strength of prevailing winds. In the hot, low-rainfall areas of Gonabad, Khaf, Bejestan, Kashmar, and Torbat-e Heydarieh, past architects had a precise understanding of airflow. Through trial and error over generations, they discovered that the cool night breeze from the northeast to southwest during summer offered the most effective natural ventilation. Accordingly, the openings of the windcatchers were positioned exactly in this direction to channel cooler air into the interior spaces. Referring to the variety of windcatcher designs in Khorasan Razavi Province, he explained, "In cities with strong, dusty winds like Gonabad, windcatchers were shorter and had multiple openings to balance air pressure. In contrast, in Kashmar or Khaf, windcatchers were tall with rectangular cross-sections to

guide airflow from higher levels downwards. Geometrically, they were designed to minimize heat exchange with the hot outside air while maximizing the passage of cool air." He described how these traditional structures functioned, "A windcatcher works primarily using the natural force of airflow. Its opening draws outside air inside, where it passes over a small water pool. Through surface evaporation, the air cools before being channeled through internal ducts into the rooms below, creating a comfortable environment. In this way, natural ventilation was achieved without any electricity or fuel consumption." He added, "Windcatchers in Khorasan Razavi Province were typically built from local materials such as mudbrick, brick, and clay to minimize heat transfer. Ancient builders skillfully used lime mortar to prevent excess moisture. The walls were thick to absorb heat during the day and slowly release it at night. Some windcatchers even had internal wooden lattices to control airflow." Rashidi emphasized, "Although

the city of Yazd is generally recognized as the symbol of Iran's windcatchers, Khorasan Razavi also hosts notable examples that carry high cultural and engineering value. Particularly in Gonabad, Khaf, and Torbat-e Heydarieh, ancient windcatchers can be seen on residential buildings and cisterns. Unfortunately, many of these structures have gradually deteriorated over time due to neglect." National programs to register windcatchers in desert regions as national heritage sites, carry out scientific restoration, and convert some into educational and tourist spaces are among the measures that could prevent this valuable heritage from being forgotten. If today's generation realizes that windcatchers, using the simplest tools, played a crucial role in cooling and providing comfort for residents, perhaps our perspective on energy, buildings, and the environment will change as well. Windcatchers are a symbol of folk knowledge — a knowledge that must be preserved and passed on to future generations.



Riab village, Gonabad  
● tasnimnews.com



Jazin village, Bajestan  
● uspace.ir

## Sarandaz weaving revives traditional handicrafts of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari

### Iranica Desk

Sarandaz is a distinctive handicraft of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, reflecting the creativity of local Bakhtiari weavers and their skill in tying traditional patterns into the warp and weft. The term Sarandaz refers to a type of Bakhtiari kilim, essentially a flat-woven carpet without pile. Its warp and weft are made from cotton, wool, or silk threads. The use of vibrant colors such as white, green, blue, red, and yellow has always attracted both weavers and buyers alike, chn. ir wrote. The patterns woven into Sarandaz are the result of the weavers' imagination and cultural heritage, passed down through generations. This type of kilim is traditionally produced in rural and tribal areas of Chaharmahal and

Bakhtiari Province, particularly in the cities of Ardal, Lordegan, and parts of Farsan. Sarandaz weaving is unique, acting as a bridge between a traditional kilim and a carpet. While similar flat-woven rugs exist in other provinces under different names, Sarandaz holds a special place in local craftsmanship. Alireza Jilan, Director General of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, explained that the designs and motifs of Sarandaz are often mentally inherited, passed down orally from previous generations. He added that these patterns are inspired by local culture, customs, traditions, and the surrounding natural environment. One distinctive aspect of Sarandaz weaving is that it is woven from the back. The weaver begins the design from the reverse side and cannot see the front until the piece is complete

— a rare and remarkable feature of this craft. Jilan noted that rural and tribal weavers in Ardal are now able to reproduce carpet designs on Sarandaz, showcasing the inherent talent and creativity of the local population. Currently, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province boasts 12,500 licensed artisans in traditional handicrafts, with 6,000 actively practicing their craft. The province is renowned for a wide variety of artisanal disciplines, including carpet weaving, kilim weaving, Jajim weaving, Choqa weaving, felt making, hat making, Giveh making, embroidery, wood carving, pottery, bag weaving, black tent weaving, lock making, stone carving, knotting, metalwork, and Khatam marquetry. Jilan emphasized that supporting artisans in urban, rural, and tribal areas remains one of the top priorities of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province.



● tarob.com





# Fajr Int'l Film Festival to welcome 200 foreign guests to Shiraz

## Arts & Culture Desk

The 43rd Fajr International Film Festival plans to host close to 200 foreign guests and a slate of 16 international films in Shiraz from November 26 to December 2, its director Rouhollah Hosseini said in Tehran on Saturday, casting the upcoming edition as part of a broader push to re-establish Iran's cultural links after years of cooled relations with Western markets.

Speaking at a media briefing at the Cinema Museum of Iran in Tehran, Hosseini said teams from Europe, the United States, East Asia and the Middle East have confirmed travel, calling their arrival a "big step" in breaking what he sees as cultural isolation, IRNA reported.

He argued that the festival's overseas turnout matters as much as its screenings because most guests act as "a kind of media", shaping how Iran is seen abroad.

Hosseini said the festival's return with a new structure, three competitive strands and three sidebars shows its ambition to re-anchor itself in the international circuit. The main International Competition will screen 16 films from 21 countries, including Greece, Hungary, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Romania, France, Norway and Saudi Arabia.

Parallel programs, Eastern Vis-

ta, New Perspective and the long-running Broken Olive section devoted to films on conflict and resilience, add titles from the United States, China, Indonesia, Turkey, Germany, Sweden and several Arab states.

He said Turkey will have an outsized presence this year, with filmmakers, producers and actors travelling as part of a cultural cooperation initiative between Tehran and Ankara. Festival workshops will dissect contemporary Turkish cinema as organizers again attempt to revive an old bilateral agreement on joint productions.

Hosseini confirmed an invitation to acclaimed Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan, a Palme d'Or winner, to sit on the international jury.

"He is a treasure of Asian and world cinema," he said, adding that organizers expect him at the opening in Shiraz.

Pressed about censorship, Hosseini insisted that "no film was barred for reasons of review" and that the selection followed the same procedures used by major festivals worldwide. One film from 2022, he said, was simply too late in seeking to join after the slate had been locked. The festival, now relocated from Tehran to Shiraz, marks the government's new decentralization policy for cultural events. Hosseini said Shiraz offers both the infrastructure and the symbolic



Rouhollah Hosseini, director of the 43rd Fajr International Film Festival, addresses the press at a Tehran conference on November 22, 2025.

● IRNA

weight needed for a festival emphasizing a "poetic" cinematic approach.

He argued that poetry forms a core component of Iran's cultural identity and can be meaningfully paired with modern filmmaking. He cited Iranian masters such as Sohrab Shahid Sales, Amir Naderi, Abbas Kiarostami and Majid Majidi as examples of filmmakers whose lyricism gained global standing. Hosseini said the event's compressed preparation schedule, far shorter than previous years, forced organizers to move quickly with invitations and logistics. The government of Fars Province and the city of Shiraz, he added, shouldered much of the hospitality, including accommodation, foreign flights and on-site services, while the Cinema Organization of Iran funded promotional material.

According to festival officials, the New Perspective section for first and second features includes 11 films from 10 countries, among them Turkey, Tunisia, China, South Korea, Serbia and Italy. The Eastern Vista sidebar brings 12 films from 18



countries, with contributions from Iran, India, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan. The Broken Olive program screens six films from 15 countries, covering themes from Gaza to regional conflicts.

In total, eight Iranian films compete across the festival's three main competitive categories. A separate "Festival of Festivals" strand screens prize-winners from Portugal, Colombia, Sweden, Switzerland, Argentina, Uruguay, Germany and Spain.

The festival's training arm, Darolfonoun, returns with 60 film students, including 38 from

abroad, taking part in workshops led by Iranian filmmakers and jury members. Some alumni are returning to mentor the latest cohort.

Hosseini emphasized that hosting foreign guests in Shiraz carries a tourism dimension: Daily visits to heritage sites are planned so visitors can "show the real face of Iran" to global audiences.

He said experienced industry figures such as actor Hassan Majouni, director Iraj Tahmasb and producer Manouchehr Shahsavari have advised the festival as it refines its international posi-

tioning.

Hosseini also said the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) lists the festival under its accredited events, noting that the scheduling, November 26 to December 2, was fixed before his appointment to comply with FIAPF's calendar rules and avoid overlap with other A-category events.

As final preparations proceeded, he said organizers will keep working to ensure the festival "holds its own name with dignity", even as they acknowledge that "first-year execution always brings imperfections".

## Iran's 'Cause of Death: Unknown' joins packed 2026 Oscars eligible list



## Arts & Culture Desk

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on Saturday placed Iran's 'Cause of Death: Unknown,' directed by Ali Zarnegar, on its long slate of eligible titles for the 98th Oscars, as it rolled out more than 300 contenders across the animated, documentary and international feature categories.

The Academy's animation branch will sift through 35 animated features this winter, trimming them to five nominees once each title meets the Academy's year-end qualifying rules. Several films still need their US qualifying run and must "tick every box" before they move to the ballot, IRNA reported.

Animated submissions can also compete for best picture, though such cross-category breakthroughs have been rare since Pixar's 'Toy Story 3' and 'Up.'

Documentary feature again drew the heftiest slate with 201 entries, though a number of films have yet to complete their theatrical requirements. The documentary branch plans to carve out a 15-title shortlist on December 16, the same day shortlists for animated short and documentary short land. Documentaries officially submitted by countries for the international race can also vie for the non-fiction trophy.

The international feature category attracted 86 submissions this year. The rules define the category as feature-length works

produced outside the United States with mainly non-English dialogue.

The Academy has loosened language rules over the years, allowing countries to submit films that do not necessarily use the national language, a shift that let France enter this year's Cannes Palme d'Or winner 'It Was Just an Accident,' directed by the Iranian filmmaker who works there.

Ballots for preliminary voting open on December 8, and close on December 12. Members across all branches may take part if they fulfil the minimum viewing requirements. The 15-film shortlist for the international race will also be unveiled on December 16.

Nominees for all categories will be announced on Thursday, January 22, 2026, with the ceremony set for March 15, 2026, at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood.

This year's regional standouts include Norway's 'Sentimental Value,' Brazil's 'The Secret Agent,' South Korea's 'No Other Choice,' Spain's 'Sirât,' and France's 'It Was Just an Accident.' Iraq's 'The President's Cake,' Taiwan's 'Left-Handed Girl,' co-written with Oscar-winner Sean Baker, and Ukraine's documentary '2000 Meters to Andriivka' by 2024 Oscar-winner Mstyslav Chernov also made the cut.

## 'The Sweet Perfume' globetrots with Argentina prize, new festival stops

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian filmmaker Mohammadreza Mohammadi clinched the top award at Argentina's Short Long World Festival this week as his short drama 'The Sweet Perfume' chalked up fresh competition slots in Poland, Italy and Nigeria. Mohammadi, who wrote the script with Samira Gandom-Goon and produced the project himself, picked up the Best Film prize at the festival's ninth edition in the north-eastern city of Corrientes, which ran from November 12 to 14, ILNA reported.

The Argentinian event, known for championing cinematic craft with an educational bent, positions its program as a visual "message" aimed at strengthening communities as well as individuals.

The 20-minute film now heads to Europe, where Euroshorts, a Polish festival founded in 1992 to back emerging creators, will screen 75 titles from December 1 to 13 in several Baltic-coast venues. The organizers folded in an international short-film competition seven years after



● ILNA

launch, turning the event into one of central Europe's more durable showcases for new directors.

Mohammadi's drama also enters Italy's Rieti and Sabina Film Festival on November 25 in Rome. The Italian platform, which seeks to spark crossover between established practitioners and younger talent, has built a reputation for spotting new writers and directors before they push into larger European circuits.

Nigeria's Benin City Film Festival will close out the film's November run from 27 to 29 November. The southern Nigerian gathering, regarded as one of the country's more ener-

getic indie forums, brings together newcomers and veteran filmmakers to swap ideas and forge partnerships that often outlive the festival cycle.

'The Sweet Perfume' follows Roghayeh, a schoolgirl who reels from a sharp bout of dizziness and nausea during a national examination after catching the "sweet" scent of a classmate's perfume. Another pupil notices her vulnerability and starts picking on her, driving the drama's emotional arc.

The cast includes Roghayeh Nikou, Shahla Rahmani, Nazanin Asgari, Mohaddeseh Rahimi-Rad, Nahid Sarvari and Saeedeh Gazrani.