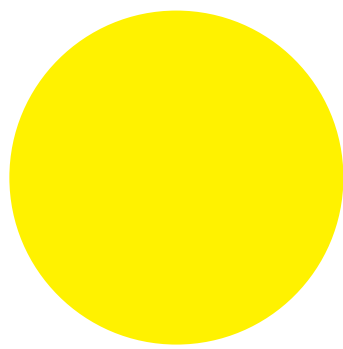


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Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi (C), flanked by his Saudi and Chinese counterparts Waleed al-Khoreiji (R) and Miao Deyu, poses for a photo after signing documents in Tehran, Iran on December 9, 2025.
● IRNA

US fan travel ban sets bad precedent for global sports management

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

INTERVIEW



Since June, the US Department of State has suspended visa issuance to nationals of 19 countries, including Iran, with only limited exceptions. Iran's football team, which is set to compete in the 2026 FIFA World Cup, as well as its technical and support staff have been exempt, but ordinary citizens, including fans hoping to travel to the United States for the matches, remain barred from entry.

Executive Director of the 2026 World Cup Task Force, Andrew Giuliani, has confirmed that Iranian nationals fall under the State Department's "travel ban list." As a result, Iranian spectators who do not hold a second passport will not be able to enter the United States to watch the matches.

The measure has been widely condemned by football fans as a breach of

the principle of equal access to global events and undermines the cultural and sporting solidarity that forms the core philosophy of the World Cup. Speaking to Iran Daily, international law expert Mehrdad Mohammadi stressed that while some states have been excluded from global sports due to political or ethical actions in the past, such exclusions have always been decided by sports federations or international bodies, not by host nations. Allowing a host country to bar fans based on nationality, he warned, could set a dangerous precedent, encouraging future hosts to use global tournaments as a political stage, further fueling the politicization of international sports.

IRAN DAILY: Considering international law and FIFA regulations, does the US decision to block Iranian spectators from entering the country for the 2026 World Cup have legal legitimacy, or could it be considered a violation of international obligations?

MOHAMMADI: Legally speaking, the United States, as a sovereign nation, maintains the legal authority to control



Iran's flag is displayed on a screen during the draw for the 2026 FIFA Football World Cup taking place in the US, Canada and Mexico, at the Kennedy Center, in Washington, DC, on December 5, 2025.
● AFP

its territory and set its own visa and immigration policies, including travel bans, for national security or foreign policy reasons. However, from the viewpoint of sports, a national travel ban that applies to the general public, including spectators, of a specific nationality could be argued to violate the spirit of the FIFA Statutes, which prohibit discrimination and the principles of universality and neutrality.

What legal or diplomatic mechanisms does Iran have to challenge this decision? Is there any possibility of pursuing the matter before international sports or judicial bodies?

Iran can definitely pursue diplomatic channels through its Ministry of foreign affairs to formally protest to the US government (where relations permit) and even to



the governments of co-hosts (Canada and Mexico). It can also raise the issue in intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations. Moreover, Iran's Football Federation can complain to FIFA's competent body (the governing body of the event) for the breach of its Statutes, requesting it to enforce its own statutes on non-discrimination and universality against a member association. Furthermore, it should be noted that FIFA has a Human Rights Policy and a commitment to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which could be invoked as a tool against such discriminatory acts.

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Tehran, Riyadh reaffirm commitment to 2023 China-brokered agreement

International Desk

Iran and Saudi Arabia on Tuesday reaffirmed their commitment to a China-brokered agreement which restored Tehran-Riyadh diplomatic relations after several years.

In a document signed between the three countries at the end of their third joint meeting to follow up the agreement, the two regional heavyweights also announced their commitment to further consolidate neighborly relations through adherence to the UN Charter, the Charter of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and international law, including respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and security of both parties.

The meeting was chaired by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Majid Takht-Ravanchi, and attended by Saudi Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Waleed al-Khoreiji and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Miao Deyu.

Iran and Saudi Arabia also welcomed the continued positive role of China and the importance of the country's support for the implementation of the



agreement.

Back in March 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia reached an agreement in Beijing to restore their diplomatic relations and re-open embassies and missions, seven years after their ties were broken off over several issues.

During the Tuesday meeting, China un-

derscored its readiness to continue supporting and encouraging the steps taken by Tehran and Riyadh to develop their relations in various fields.

The three countries also expressed their eagerness to expand cooperation in various areas, including diverse economic and political fields. They also empha-

sized the importance of dialogue and cooperation among regional countries with the aim of enhancing security, stability, peace, and economic development.

The previous rounds of the trilateral committee were held in Beijing and Riyadh.



Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi (c), Saudi Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Waleed al-Khoreiji (2nd R) and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Miao Deyu (2nd L), sign documents in Tehran, Iran on December 9, 2025.

● MIZAN

Europe main factor behind failure in resolving Iran nuclear issue: *Russia*

International Desk

Russia's deputy foreign minister branded Europe on Monday as the main factor behind a failure in finding a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear issue while stressing Moscow's support for Tehran's efforts to achieve the stated goal.

Regarding the possibility of resuming talks between Iran and the United States on the nuclear issue, Sergei Ryabkov said in an interview with "International Affairs" magazine that, "Such a prospect exists, and we support our Iranian colleagues and friends in seeking for a negotiated solution."

Ryabkov stressed that the European powers in their political and geopolitical battles for influence have reached a point where they have literally turned their back on a negotiated solution, calling them the main destructive factor in finding such a solution. The Russian diplomat said the role of the European Union's bureaucracy is currently extremely negative for the entire system of international relations, adding that this issue fundamentally af-



Sergei Ryabkov
● ITASS

fects everything, including Iran's nuclear issue.

Ryabkov said that despite the US and Israel's acts of aggression against Iran in June as well as Europeans' measures in the UN Security Council against Iran, the Iranians are still committed to a political and negotiated solution for the nuclear issue.

"We support them in this. We believe that this path is the only possible one in the current conditions."

Iran's nuclear program has been a source of contention with Western countries for more than two decades. While Iran insists

that its nuclear activities are entirely peaceful and aimed at civilian purposes such as energy production and medical research, Western powers — particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany — have long expressed concern that Tehran could be seeking the capability to develop nuclear weapons.

Tensions have increased in recent months especially after the three European parties to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal — Germany, France and Britain — activated the so-called snapback mechanism embedded in the nuclear agreement on August 28, which led to the reimposition of international sanctions against Iran. They accused Iran of not honoring its obligations under the nuclear deal from which the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018 and the European parties to the deal failed to fulfil their commitments.

Tehran has repeatedly said it was the United States and its European allies who undermined the 2015 nuclear deal by failing to honor their commitments not Iran.

IAEA Safeguards Agreement fails to address post-war conditions: *Kamalvandi*



Spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Behrouz Kamalvandi, (L) speaks during an interview with IRNA published on December 9, 2025.

● IRNA

facilities — in some of them enriched uranium had been stored.

Since then, Iran has suspended cooperation with the IAEA and limited its access to the damaged nuclear sites despite being under pressure by the Western countries to give access to the IAEA inspectors.

Kamalvandi said if a country grants access to the UN nuclear agency in such conditions, it would mean that the agency would collect information and transfer it to the Board of Governors, and ultimately, this information would be made available to the member states.

"Consequently, confidential information would fall into the hands of our adversaries. This would be akin to voluntarily providing them with information that could serve as the basis for their future actions. No country does this."

Kamalvandi stressed that the IAEA can have access to undamaged facilities, but concerning the damaged facilities, a mutual understanding and agreement must first be reached, which requires negotiations.

International Desk

The spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Behrouz Kamalvandi said on Tuesday that the Safeguards Agreement of the UN nuclear agency does not address conditions after wars.

When a country joins the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, it also signs the Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) — which has also been signed by Iran. But the agreement is formulated to oversee "normal conditions, not wartime situations", Kamalvandi said in an interview with IRNA. Back in June, Israel and the United States launched military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in an unprovoked aggression. The strikes have resulted in serious damage to the Iranian

US fan travel ...

What consequences might this ban have for the principle that sports should remain global and non-political, and for FIFA's slogan "Football for All?"

Such a ban directly undermines the principle of universality by preventing a segment of the global football community from participating in the celebration, thus making the World Cup less "global" and more exclusive. It introduces a significant political dimension, demonstrating that the host country's domestic and foreign policy can directly override FIFA's stated goal of "Football for All." It forces FIFA to navigate a complex political environment, compromising its claim of being politically neutral. It, certainly, risks

setting a negative precedent where future host nations feel empowered to use major sporting events as a platform to enforce their political or discriminatory policies, further politicizing the sporting sphere.

Is there any precedent for a World Cup host — or host of another major sporting event — banning spectators of a particular nationality? If so, what was the outcome?

Of course, as far as I know, there has never been a similar case in which the host of a World Cup or a major sporting event banned or restricted spectators from a specific country. However, throughout history, several countries have been excluded from global sports due to political

or ethical actions, or international sanctions. For example, South Africa during apartheid, Yugoslavia in the early 1990s under UN sanctions, Rhodesia under its white-minority regime, or even countries like Russia after the Ukraine war, due to international sanctions. All these exclusions were decided by sports federations or international bodies. For a host country, rather than a sports organization, to prevent spectators of a specific nationality from entering would undoubtedly politicize sport and undermine the principles of neutrality and non-discrimination of the organizing body, namely FIFA. This would also conflict with the objectives of the Olympic Charter and, specifically, the fundamental principles of Olympism.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

CARTOON



Iran, Belarus expand ties in energy, transit, agriculture, pharma sectors

Minister: Tehran pitches energy contracts to friendly nations in win-win push

Economy Desk

Iran and Belarus advanced a broad package of cooperation spanning energy, petrochemicals, rail transit, agricultural machinery, and pharmaceuticals during Belarusian Industry Minister Andrei Kuznetsov's visit to Tehran on Monday and Tuesday, after he expressed hope that bilateral trade could increase tenfold over the next two to three years. The talks, held alongside the 18th session of the Iran-Belarus Joint Economic Commission chaired by Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Mohammad Atabak, underscored both nations' push to deepen economic ties amid shared efforts through trade and financial mechanisms. Iranian Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad told the Belarusian industry minister that Tehran has prepared a "basket of upstream contracts" in oil and gas, describing Iran as a "land of golden investment opportunities" for friendly nations, and added that the contracts are "designed to create a win-win situation for

both sides," SHANA reported. Kuznetsov welcomed the offer and signaled Belarus's readiness to expand cooperation, particularly in petrochemicals and the export of catalysts and finished products to Iran. In a separate meeting on Tuesday, Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Farzaneh Sadeq Malvajerd emphasized Iran's logistical readiness to serve as Belarus's gateway to southern markets. She announced Tehran's willingness to allocate dedicated areas in southern ports and at the Aprin dry port for Belarusian use and highlighted the recent signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two national railway authorities, IRNA reported. Sadeq Malvajerd noted that the eastern branch of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) — routing through Incih-Borun and Sarakhs — has been finalized for regular rail cargo traffic, enabling Belarus to export containerized and bulk goods through Iran "in the shortest time and at competitive rates."

➔ The 18th session of Iran-Belarus Joint Economic Commission convenes in Tehran on December 8, 2025. ● IRNA

Jointly production line for agricultural machinery
Iranian Agriculture Minister Gholamreza Nouri Qezelgeh and Kuznetsov agreed to jointly establish a production line for agricultural machinery in Belarus. They also finalized plans to co-produce chemical fertilizers, leveraging Belarus's potash supplies and Iran's industrial capacity, IRIB reported. Nouri stressed the need for diversified financial channels, proposing trilateral payment mechanisms involving Russia to facilitate trade. The Belarusian minister echoed this, stating that agricultural mechanization "can become a major pillar" of bilateral economic relations.

Iran's logistics position as a catalyst for deeper ties
Speaking at the joint commission session on Monday, Atabak highlighted Iran's strategic logistics position as a catalyst for deeper



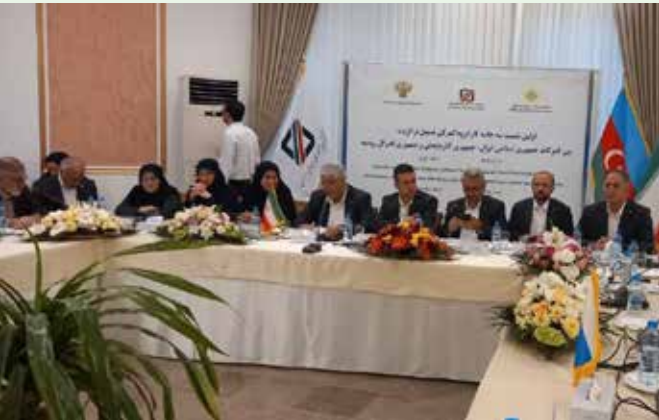
ties. "Iran's location enables Belarus to access regional markets and showcase its goods through border terminals," he said, adding that operationalizing trade agreements and establishing a free trade zone would mark a "turning point" in bilateral economic history.

Pharmaceutical, medical equipment production lines
Both sides signaled willingness to set up joint pharmaceutical and

medical equipment production lines in Belarus, with Kuznetsov citing particular interest in cooperation on fresh produce, medicine, and biotechnology. He further expressed openness to exchanges in education, culture, and tourism, and confirmed Belarus's readiness to supply mining equipment and trucks in return for Iranian agricultural products, dried fruits, and pharmaceuticals. The outcomes of the two-day

talks reflect a coordinated effort by both governments to diversify trade, enhance connectivity via the INSTC, and embed cooperation in high-value sectors — setting the stage for what officials described as a "sustainable and constructive economic partnership" in the region. Kuznetsov expressed hope that, with current planning in place, bilateral ties could increase tenfold within the next two to three years.

Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan form joint customs committee to enhance Astara transit



Economy Desk

Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan held their first trilateral customs working group meeting on Tuesday in Astara, northern Iran, launching a joint committee aimed at resolving operational bottlenecks and doubling cargo transit volumes among the three countries. Legal and Supervision Deputy of Iran's Customs, Ebrahim Naqdi, made the remarks on Tuesday in Astara, Gilan Province, on the sidelines of the first trilateral meeting of the customs working group on transit facilitation among Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan, IRNA reported, saying the session focused on technical and expert-level discussions to address challenges hindering trade and transit flows. "The trilateral customs working group meeting was held to facilitate the movement of goods and transit among the three countries," Naqdi said. "Today's session thoroughly examined current obstacles and explored practical solutions to boost trade, increase cargo carrier movement, and enhance transit efficiency."

According to IRNA, Naqdi told reporters that the session marked the first formal step in implementing agreements previously reached during high-level negotiations, including a 2022 memorandum of understanding and a trilateral customs cooperation deal signed in Baku in October 2025. "Iran explicitly raised its demand to increase transit and cargo movement, emphasizing that with existing infrastructure — particularly at the Astara border — the current volume of transit could be doubled," Naqdi said. He urged Azerbaijan — described as a "friendly and neighboring country" — to enhance its capacity to accept and process transiting cargo. "We hope the issues raised will soon be resolved and trade volumes will grow," he added. Currently, around 250 inbound and 250 outbound trucks cross the Astara border daily, while the Bilasuvar border in northwestern Iran sees approximately 200 to 250 trucks entering or exiting each day, he said. "This level is inconsistent with the depth of our trade

➔ Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan hold their first trilateral customs working group meeting in Astara, Gilan Province, Iran, on December 9, 2025. ● IRNA

relations and the needs of the three countries and must be upgraded," Naqdi added. He stressed that reducing truck wait times at borders, facilitating carrier acceptance procedures, and expanding Azerbaijani customs capacity are "urgent necessities." The three nations agreed to prioritize standardization, simplification, and procedural facilitation for faster cargo clearance — all while maintaining necessary regulatory controls, he added. Naqdi noted that the October 2025 Baku agreement among the deputy customs heads of Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan mandated the creation of a joint working committee to address trilateral issues. "Today's meeting is the direct outcome of that agreement," he said. "Iran's Customs Administration took the lead in convening the first session, coordinating with the Foreign Ministry and other relevant agencies," he said, adding that he expected "many of the border-related problems — including truck acceptance delays and unnecessary stoppages — to be resolved in the near future." He added that the customs authorities of all three countries share a "serious commitment" to significantly increase trade volumes, a path that will continue through persistent follow-up, active customs diplomacy, and sustained trilateral cooperation.

Exports to Tajikistan up 40% as direct flights boost trade, tourism: Chamber

By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

INTERVIEW



Iranian exports to Tajikistan rose more than 40% in the first seven months of the calendar year, which began on March 21, compared with the same period a year earlier, driven overwhelmingly by shipments from Khorasan Razavi Province, a senior trade official said. According to Kazem Shirdel, the vice president of the Iran-Tajikistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, Iran's exports to Tajikistan totaled over 365,000 metric tons valued at more than \$225 million during the first seven months of the current year. This marks a significant increase from the roughly 260,000 tons worth \$157 million recorded in the same timeframe in the last Iranian calendar year. Shirdel emphasized that Khorasan Razavi accounted for 74% of the export volume and 81% of the export value during this period. For the full last year, Iran exported 490,000 tons worth \$302 million to Tajikistan, with the same province contributing 83% by volume and 80% by value. Iranian exports to much of Central Asia are either directly handled by Khorasan-based economic actors or routed through the northeastern province before reaching neighboring markets, the businessperson noted. The growth in trade coincides with a notable uptick in tour-



ism and people-to-people exchanges, following the mutual abolition of visa requirements between the two countries. Direct weekly flights between Iran and Tajikistan have increased to around seven, with services operating from Mashhad, Tehran, and Kish. The expansion has spurred medical tourism and broader commercial activity, Shirdel said. According to the representative of the Khorasan Razavi Exporters Union, high-level diplomatic visits by Iranian and Tajik ministers and officials, coupled with the current administration's emphasis on economic diplomacy, have played a pivotal role in deepening bilateral trade ties. Under the new government, border province governors — including those from Khorasan Razavi — have been granted expanded authority to negotiate trade arrangements with neighboring countries, with guidance from the private sector. Recent official economic delegations to Central Asian nations, including Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, have included private-sector representatives, a practice less common under previous administrations. This public-private coordination has enhanced trade facilitation, Shirdel added.

He said that flight connectivity has also markedly improved. Direct flights, once limited to two routes from Tehran and Mashhad, now include three to four weekly services from Tehran and two to three from Mashhad. Plans are underway to add routes from Kish and Shiraz. These developments are expected to yield visible gains in both tourism and exports by the end of the Iranian year in March 2026, Shirdel said. "Key Iranian exports to Tajikistan include steel construction products such as rebar and profiles, PVC compounds, polymer granules, foodstuffs, and petrochemicals. In return, Tajikistan mainly exports cotton to Iran." Iran maintains a trade surplus with Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, and remains a dominant supplier to the region, he said. To foster balanced trade, Shirdel proposed importing Tajik dried fruits via the Sarakhs Free Trade Zone for processing, packaging, and re-export to other regional markets with added value. He also called for structured management of incoming medical tourists from Tajikistan, including the formation of specialized task forces to monitor expenditures and prevent potential misuse or irregularities.

New partnership forming between Iran, Sahel region of Africa

In epoch of geopolitical transition



By Esmail Razaghi
Expert in international relations

OPINION

The recent trip of the assistant to Iran's minister of Foreign Affairs and director-general for the Department of Africa to Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso may be regarded as a consequential development in imparting greater dynamism to our nation's African diplomacy.

In this trip, not only was the official message of the country's minister of Foreign Affairs separately conveyed to the foreign ministers of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, but it was also viewed as illustrative of Iran's new foreign-policy approach toward Africa, in general, and toward the Sahel region, in particular.

The Sahel, today, has metamorphosed into one of the pivotal loci of geopolitical transformations. The aforementioned three states, as some of the significant and influential countries in the Sahel region, have, in recent years, through the adoption of an independence-seeking disposition and through emphasis upon a departure from the previous axis, which may be interpreted as an order of dependence, attracted the attention of many regional and global actors. They have done so by instituting a new paradigm of governance predicated upon sovereignty, preservation of territorial integrity, and diversification of their bilateral, multilateral, and international collaborations with other states. In such an atmosphere, Iran's proactive entry into this region indicates Tehran's attentiveness to Africa's emergent transformations and to new opportunities for South-South cooperation.

The principal message of this trip may be encapsulated in a single proposition: Iran desires the development of egalitarian, equilibrated, unconditional, non-interventionist relations grounded in shared interests with the states of the Sahel region. This approach, which stands in contradistinction to the historical patterns of domination and foreign influence in the Sahel, possesses particular significance for the new governments of these states.

In the meetings with the foreign ministers of the Sahel states, the message of friendship and the formal invitation of Iran's foreign minister were presented, and, simultaneously, Tehran's support for these states' independent and anti-colonial orientation and for the deliberate efforts of the statesmen of these three countries to establish and develop an alliance among themselves under the title of the Alliance of Sahel States was emphasized. The affirmative response of the government of Niger, especially in view of that state's independent vote in the International Atomic Energy Agency, demonstrated that Iran's respect-centered approach in West Africa has been met with receptivity.

From politics to economics: real priorities of Sahel states

Although the trip of the director-general for the Ministry's Department of Africa possessed a political character, the substance of the discussions was, to a significant extent, economic and development-oriented. The Sahel states confront grave challenges in two domains: first, food security and agricultural development; second, the scarcity of infrastructural systems in health, pharmaceuticals, energy, and technical training. Iran's capacities correspond precisely to these exigencies. Iranian knowledge-based enterprises in pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, water systems, and low-cost energy can play a



Mali's Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop (R) and Assistant to Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director-General for the Department of Africa Akbar Khosravi Nejad hold a document during their meeting in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on November 28, 2025.

consequential role in ameliorating conditions in these states. For this reason, in the discussions conducted, preliminary concord was achieved on several axes:

- cooperation in agriculture and food security;
- utilization of Iranian technologies in power supply, water purification, and solar energy;
- participation in health and pharmaceuticals;
- and examination of new transit corridors for connecting West Africa to the Persian Gulf and West Asia.

If these axes enter an executive phase, they may elevate the relations between Iran and the Sahel states from a political level to a level of structural and enduring cooperation.

New trajectory in Iran's African diplomacy

A significant portion of the importance of this trip resides in its future-oriented outcomes. All three foreign ministers of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have welcomed Iran's official invitation, and it is expected that in the coming months, we shall witness their reciprocal trips to Tehran. These political exchanges will not only culminate in the signing of cooperation documents but will also fa-

cilitate the entry of technical delegations and private-sector actors from both sides. Through its active engagement with the Sahel region, Iran is in the process of shaping a "new African depth" in its foreign policy; a depth that is founded not upon intervention, dependency, or the fierce rivalries of major powers, but upon authentic cooperation, the transfer of practical technologies, and respect for the sovereignty of nations.

Why is Sahel important for Iran?

Three fundamental reasons exist:

- **Political transformation in the Sahel:** The member states of the Sahel Alliance, inclusive of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, have redefined their foreign-policy orientation, and this has created an appropriate space for cooperation and engagement with other independent non-Western actors.
- **Specific developmental needs:** Domains such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and low-cost energy correspond entirely with Iran's capabilities.
- **New geopolitical competition:** The entry of independent actors into the Sahel region indicates the existence of political, economic, agricultural, and industrial capacities in this region, which may constitute a suitable and

alluring arena for engagement by other independent actors, including our nation.

The recent trip of the assistant to Iran's minister of Foreign Affairs to Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso is assessed as another consequential step in invigorating the African diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran vis-à-vis the Sahel region. This significant transformation constitutes a commencement for the transmutation of the political will of Iran and the member states of the Sahel Alliance into multilateral cooperation.

The Sahel region is today experiencing one of its most consequential periods of political transformation since independence, and Iran stands in a position in which it may, with respect, experience, and indigenous technologies, constitute a trustworthy partner for the indigenous development of these states. If this trajectory continues with meticulous planning, project-based follow-through, and active participation of the private sector, the relations between Iran and the Sahel may evolve into one of the successful exemplars of South-South cooperation in the forthcoming decade.

The article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.



Heads of state of Niger's General Abdourahmane Tiani (front-L), Mali's Assimi Goita (front-C), and Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traore (front-R) pose for photographs during the first ordinary summit of heads of state and governments of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in Niamey, Niger, on July 6, 2024.



The principal message of this trip may be encapsulated in a single proposition: Iran desires the development of egalitarian, equilibrated, unconditional, non-interventionist relations grounded in shared interests with the states of the Sahel region. This approach, which stands in contradistinction to the historical patterns of domination and foreign influence in the Sahel, possesses particular significance for the new governments of these states.

MENA reconfiguring global balance



By Corneliu Pivariu
Highly decorated general of the Romanian army

SPEECH

1. MENA as a key space of global rebalancing

The Middle East and North Africa — known under the acronym MENA — represent, more than ever, a crossroads of history, religion, energy, and geopolitics. Here, millennial civilizations, contemporary ideologies, and global economic interests collide and reshape themselves in a continuous process. We live in an era where transformations unfold at the pace of a historical revolution, and developments in this region have repercussions that reverberate worldwide. After more than seven decades of almost uninterrupted conflict, MENA now stands at the centre of a new strategic competition where energy, technology, and political influence intertwine within a transforming architecture of power:

through which not only energy, but global stability itself, flows. Europe, faced with its own energy vulnerability since 2022, is rediscovering MENA's strategic role — not merely as an alternative source, but as an indispensable partner for energy transition and global security.

3. Strategic competition among major powers

Nowhere is the new global contest for influence more visible than in MENA. The United States, China, Russia, the European Union, and regional actors — India, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and others — simultaneously compete for space, resources, and narrative control. The United States seeks a balance between partial disengagement and sustained influence, relying on selective partnerships and the consolidation of the Abraham Accords. China promotes a subtle strategy: through the Belt and Road Initiative and



● ATLANTIC COUNCIL



***Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)**
The map highlights countries that are often associated with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.
● RESEARCHGATE

The region has become the symbol of the emerging multipolar world — one without a single hegemon, but with a complex network of regional and global powers that cooperate, compete, and condition one another. This multipolarity does not signify fragmentation, but rather a redistribution of decision-making centres and their adaptation to the logic of strategic interdependence.

2. Energy, strategic interdependence

Energy remains the keystone of power in the Middle East. The Persian Gulf States — Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates — still hold a dominant share of the world's oil and gas reserves. However, they no longer play the passive role of resource suppliers. Over the past two decades, these countries have evolved into strategic decision centres, diversifying their economies and investments in technology, infrastructure, defence, and green energy. A new form of power is thus emerging: not the one that merely extracts the resource, but the one that transforms it, directs it, and connects it. Green hydrogen, solar energy from the Maghreb, trans-Saharan interconnections, maritime corridors, and port infrastructures now form the circulatory system of the global economy. Energy has become not only the source but also the language of contemporary geopolitics. As shown in my previous analyses on BRICS and "Globalisation 2.0," the redistribution of energy and technological flows is shifting the global centre of gravity from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, with MENA serving as the critical interface between the Global South and the industrialised North. Energy corridors — from Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb to Suez and the Eastern Mediterranean — are the arteries

its mediation role (e.g., between Iran and Saudi Arabia), it asserts itself as a major economic and diplomatic actor — without direct military presence. Russia, though weakened by the war in Ukraine, maintains strategic anchors in Syria, Iran, and Algeria, cultivating asymmetric networks of influence. The European Union remains the main trade partner, yet it still lacks a coherent security strategy for the region. Meanwhile, India discreetly expands its economic and technological footprint in the Persian Gulf and East Africa, while BRICS+ increasingly emerges as an attractive platform for Arab states seeking to diversify their financial and energy partnerships. Regional actors are also asserting greater autonomy:

- Iran capitalises on the "Axis of Resistance" (Hezbollah, the Houthis, Shia armed groups);
- Saudi Arabia diversifies its partnerships and aspires to a global role within BRICS+;
- Turkey adopts a flexible stance between NATO, Russia, and the Muslim world;
- Israel, as I have shown in the study "Super Sparta", strengthens its technological and intelligence power, but faces a serious erosion of image and growing diplomatic isolation amid the Gaza crisis.

In the logic of the new realpolitik, competition is no longer purely military but also narrative: each actor strives to define the meaning of world order, to impose its own framework of legitimacy and its own version of international normality.

4. Security, instability — fragile equilibria

The Gaza crisis remains the epicentre of tensions. After a year of open conflict, the human and political toll is tragic: tens of thousands of victims, massive destruction, a paralysed peace process, and a climate of hatred fuelling new gen-

erations of radicalism. The assassination of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders has not brought stability, only a pause between two phases of the same confrontation. The war in Gaza has become a symbol of a world increasingly unable to negotiate lasting peace — the latest agreement concluded in Egypt being a telling example. Behind the military confrontation lies a battle for narrative control: who is the aggressor, who is the victim, and who defines the legitimacy of action? This is the purest expression of the strategic narrative — a concept that redefines the relationship between power and perception in the 21st century. The expansion of the conflict through at-

tacks from Yemen and the pressure on Red Sea maritime routes shows that regionalised warfare has already become a reality. Against this backdrop, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia attempt cautious mediation efforts, but the lack of consensus among major powers keeps peace as more declarative than substantive objective. Security in MENA today is a fragile mosaic in which local stability depends on global balances, and each conflict represents a link in a broader geopolitical chain. In a deeper historical sense, we are witnessing a reactivation of post-Ottoman fragmentations, where symbolic frontiers have returned stronger than geographic ones.

5. MENA as laboratory of the new world order

The Middle East and North Africa have become the testing ground of the multipolar order. Here intersect the new forms of power: economic, energetic, technological, and informational. Here, too, the parameters of European security are indirectly being shaped. The region is no longer merely an object of great power competition, but an autonomous actor capable of influencing global trends. In a world where the "force of arms" is increasingly replaced by the power of connections, true influence will be measured by the ability to understand, anticipate, and connect. The future will not belong solely to the greatest powers, but also to those who can build bridges between them.

The full speech was delivered at the 11th MEPEI Forum "Middle East from Chaos to the New (dis)Order".



A visitor discusses products at a booth at the 29th Iran International Oil, Gas, Refining, and Petrochemical Exhibition, also known as Iran Oil Show 2025, in Tehran, Iran, on May 11, 2025.
● SHANA

The redistribution of energy and technological flows is shifting the global centre of gravity from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, with MENA serving as the critical interface between the Global South and the industrialised North. Energy corridors — from Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb to Suez and the Eastern Mediterranean — are the arteries through which not only energy, but global stability itself, flows.

Iran 'in advanced talks' with Portugal over pre-World Cup friendly

Sports Desk

Iran is "in advanced talks" with Portugal over a friendly match in June, Mahdi Taj, chairman of the Iranian Football Federation, has confirmed.

The game would be part of both teams' preparations for next summer's World Cup finals, which will be co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada from June 11.

The draw for the group stage of the global showpiece took place in Washington, D.C., on Friday, where Team Melli was placed in Group G alongside Belgium, Egypt, and New Zealand.

"Since the draw was held, we have been working on setting up friendlies for the international breaks in March and June," Taj told Iranian state television on Monday night, adding, "We are already in advanced talks with Portugal, and a deal could be agreed within the next few days."

If finalized, the match would mark the third meeting between Iran and Cristiano Ron-

aldo's Portugal in the past two decades.

The Portuguese superstar scored in his team's 2-0 victory over Iran at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, before the sides played out a 1-1 draw at the 2018 tournament in Russia.

Iranian fans have been eager to see their team tested against a top-tier opponent since the country secured its fourth consecutive World Cup qualification last June.

Iran took part in the CAFA Nations Cup – featuring Central Asian teams – in August, before facing Russia and Tanzania in October, and then played Cape Verde and familiar foe Uzbekistan in November.

"We will likely play Portugal on June 6. We have also approached Scotland, which resembles New Zealand's playing style, and Iceland in recent days, though we are far from an agreement with them," Taj said.

"We will also aim to arrange a friendly with Spain when it visits Qatar to play Egypt in March."



● FFIRI

Iran was represented at Friday's draw by head coach Amir Qalenei; Mohammad-Mahdi Nabi, the federation's vice president; and Omid Jamali, its head of international relations. The delegation's

attendance marked a reversal of the initial decision to boycott the ceremony after the United States refused to issue visas for several Iranian officials, including Taj. The FFIRI president said the

country will have to adopt contingency plans given that its geopolitical foe may deny entry to members of Iran's squad ahead of June's tournament. "We will be ready for different

scenarios, as individuals who have completed military service in an organization not approved by the US might face the same issues. We need to have backups for any player who is not granted an entry visa.

"We have filed a complaint with FIFA, and I personally spoke with [FIFA secretary-general] Mattias Grafström in Qatar regarding the matter. FIFA could have taken a firmer stance against the United States, and we expect it to do so if this happens again," Taj said.

Iran will kick off its World Cup campaign against New Zealand at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, on June 15, before facing European heavyweight Belgium at the same venue six days later. The team will then travel to Seattle, Washington, to face Egypt in its final group-stage match at Lumen Field on June 26.

With eight third-placed teams across the 12 groups advancing to the round of 32, Iran will fancy its chances of securing a first-ever knockout-stage berth at the seventh attempt.

No Iranian player 'guaranteed place' at Futsal Asian Cup, Shamsaei insists

Sports Desk

No Iranian player "will be guaranteed a place" at next month's AFC Futsal Asian Cup in Indonesia, head coach Vahid Shamsaei has insisted.

The record 13-time champion will begin its title defense in Group D against Malaysia on January 26, before facing Saudi Arabia two days later in Jakarta. The final round of group fixtures will see Shamsaei's men take on Afghanistan on February 1 – a rematch of their 2-2 draw at the Islamic Solidarity Games last month in Riyadh.

The top two teams in the group will advance to the quarterfinals.



● FFIRI

"From day one, I made it clear that a place on the national team

is not guaranteed. No player, even one with the highest national

honors, should feel their spot is secure," the Iranian futsal great told the official website of the country's Football Federation.

"We will continue this policy to ensure that only the most diligent and ambitious players are named in the squad, so the national team can enter the Asian Cup in peak form and defend the prestige of Iranian futsal," added the three-time Asian Player of the Year, who lifted the Asian Cup trophy eight times as a player.

"My technical staff and I have been closely monitoring the Iranian league week in, week out, with the aim of ensuring a strong presence at the Asian Cup," Shamsaei said, adding, "A

provisional 25-man list will be submitted to the AFC soon. We have assessed all players worthy of wearing the national team jersey. Close communication with club coaches has played a significant role, providing important technical analysis."

Shamsaei said the team's first training camp ahead of the Asian Cup, featuring 20 players, will get underway soon, though the final squad will be trimmed to 14 for the tournament.

"There is a possibility of one or two surprise inclusions in the new list — players who will be given a chance to showcase their qualities," he said.

Iran will enter the Asian Cup

fresh off an impressive title-winning campaign at the Islamic Solidarity Games, where Shamsaei's team defeated Morocco 5-0 in the final, making amends for last year's quarterfinal setback against the African powerhouse at the Futsal World Cup in Uzbekistan.

"Unlike previous major events in recent years, where the national team entered tournaments with injuries to key players, all players were available in Riyadh. This was a major factor in winning the gold medal and provided an excellent opportunity to fully evaluate performances, allowing us to select the final list with greater insight."

WTT Youth Contender: Iranians claim three boys' trophies in Dammam

Sports Desk

Table tennis prodigy Erfan Yazdanbakhsh triumphed in an all-Iranian final as the country secured three trophies in the U17 boys' singles competition at the latest WTT Youth Contender event in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, on Monday. Yazdanbakhsh defeated two opponents from the host country to win Group 6 and advance to the round of 32, where he beat Jordan's Yousef Albayyadah 3-0 (11-6, 11-5, 11-7).

Following victories over Qatar's Yousif Abdalla (3-0) and Kazakhstan's Alexey Markin (3-1), Yazdanbakhsh faced his high-profile compatriot Benyamin Faraji in the semifinals.

Yazdanbakhsh prevailed in straight games (11-7, 11-6, 11-9) to secure a spot in the final against another fellow Iranian, Mohammad Habibi.

In a thrilling showdown at the Green Sports Halls, Habibi twice rallied from behind to force a deciding fifth game, but ultimately settled for the runner-up

trophy after a 3-2 defeat (11-9, 6-11, 11-7, 6-11, 11-7).

Faraji finished joint third alongside Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman Al Taher, who was beaten 3-0 (11-6, 11-7, 11-6) by Habibi in the semifinals.

Faraji was part of the Iranian quartet that claimed the men's team silver at last month's Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, following a final loss to Kazakhstan. He also paired with Amirhossein Hodaei to win a joint bronze medal in the doubles event alongside a Saudi duo.

Having won a historic under-15 bronze at last year's ITTF World Youth Championships, Faraji missed out on a podium finish in this year's edition in late November. A knee injury sustained just before his quarterfinal match in the under-19 category proved costly, clearly hampering the Iranian prodigy's mobility and causing visible discomfort during a 4-0 defeat (11-2, 11-9, 11-5, 11-6) to the formidable Chinese player Li Hechen.



Iranian table tennis player Erfan Yazdanbakhsh won the U17 boys' singles title at the WTT Youth Contender event in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

● IRNA

Qanbari, Khajavi join Persepolis Women



Zahra Qanbari

● VARZESH3



Zahra Khajavi

● VARZESH3

Sports Desk

Iranian international duo Zahra Qanbari and Zahra Khajavi have joined Persepolis for the second half of the Kowsar Premier League.

Both players had signed with Ista Alborz for the start of the new domestic top-flight campaign, helping their team to third place in the table with 17 points from nine games – 10 points behind defending champions Bam Khatoon and seven behind Golgozar Sirjan.

Newly-promoted Persepolis sits seventh in the 10-team table with 11 points, having managed only three wins in nine outings. The club will hope the addition of the two star players turns its fortunes around.

An established midfielder, the 33-year-old Qanbari is also capable of playing as a winger or striker. She won the Iranian league title on three occasions with Khatoon and helped the club reach the AFC Women's Champions League quarterfi-

nals last season.

Widely regarded as Iran's best goalkeeper, Khajavi has been the national team's first choice in recent years, though she missed Iran's trip to Tashkent for a pair of friendly matches against Uzbekistan earlier this month.

The 26-year-old keeper holds the record for the most consecutive clean sheets in Iranian league history, having not conceded a goal for 10 successive games – a total of 953 minutes – during the 2019-20 season.

Preserving history at Naqsh-e Rostam in Fars Province

Iranica Desk

The Persepolis World Heritage Site in Fars Province encompasses a vast area, with one of its most significant sections being the historic complex of Naqsh-e Rostam, said Head of the site Mohammad Javad Ja'fari. In an interview with ISNA, he elaborated that Naqsh-e Rostam represents a complete archaeological and historical zone, containing valuable remains that span from the Elamite period to the Islamic era. The site's most notable features are the Achaemenid tombs, while prominent monuments from the Sassanid era are also present. Ja'fari noted that archaeological studies at Naqsh-e Rostam have been relatively limited. Most research took place between the 1930s and 1940s, after which attention shifted primarily to conservation and restoration. The site houses four major Achaemenid tombs — those of Xerxes, Darius I, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II — which remain among its most iconic structures. He added that all programs at the site prioritize preservation, extending beyond superficial restoration to include structural reinforcement, decorative conservation, and broader site-area safeguarding to main-



● IRNA

tain its historical integrity. According to Ja'fari, every area of Naqsh-e Rostam requires dedicated attention, and staff members are actively engaged in these efforts. Addressing current challenges, Ja'fari highlighted that the main obstacle is insufficient funding for emergency preservation. Available resources are very limited, restricting the launch of extensive restoration operations. Currently, restoration work is concentrated on Xerxes' tomb, while Darius I, Darius II, and the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht monument urgently require

protective studies and intervention. Regarding major projects at Naqsh-e Rostam, he emphasized that preservation and restoration are the first priorities, followed by the upgrading of tourism infrastructure. The current access road is a rural and hazardous path, and plans have been drafted to reroute it farther from the site to better align with the historic context. The new entrance is planned for the western side, a location that is historically compatible with the complex and offers an optimal access point for visitors.

Ja'fari also announced plans to implement night visits at Naqsh-e Rostam. "We are working to fully upgrade the site's lighting this year so that pilot night tours can be conducted, with the program later extended to Persepolis," he said. He emphasized that the improved lighting will not only enhance visibility but also ensure visitor safety during nighttime tours. On the issue of ground subsidence, he explained that the phenomenon affects the entire Marvdasht plain, and Naqsh-e Rostam, situated at the junction of the plain and the moun-

tain, is also impacted. Preliminary studies conducted by Shiraz University indicate that while the mountain rock remains largely unharmed, lower structures, fortifications, and even the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht could be affected. The results will be reviewed in expert sessions, and comprehensive management strategies will be developed, with full findings presented at a "Subsidence Workshop" during Research Week (December 15-18) at Persepolis. Regarding erosion caused by excessive tourist numbers,

Ja'fari cautioned that overcapacity poses significant risks. "Worldwide, access is never allowed beyond capacity, and the same measures must apply at Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis," he stated. He added that visitor flow will be reorganized this year, with tourists ascending via one staircase and descending through the southern terrace, reducing pressure on the steps. He concluded by noting that visitor capacity management plans are being finalized, and detailed announcements will be made soon.

Sarein to host Second Int'l Spa, Wellness Tourism Festival



● IRNA

Iranica Desk

The Second International Spa and Wellness Tourism Festival is scheduled to be held in May 2026 in Sarein. The event aims to highlight the capabilities of Ardabil Province and promote the region's growing health-tourism sector. Jafar Bazri, President of the Ardabil Province Hoteliers Association, announced the news and stated that organizing this festival will create a valuable opportunity to showcase the province's extensive health-tourism potential and to strengthen both national and international collaborations. According to him, the festival is expected to serve as a platform for expanding partnerships among wellness centers, spa facilities, and tourism professionals, chn.ir wrote. Ardabil Province, home to 23 hydrotherapy facilities, mineral springs, and specialized spa centers, has in recent years become a major destination for health and wellness tourism in Iran. Bazri added that a significant number of domestic and foreign visitors — particularly travelers from the Republic of Azerbaid-

jan and neighboring countries — choose Ardabil for therapeutic purposes and to benefit from its renowned mineral waters. Highlighting Sarein's prominent standing in the field of health tourism, he emphasized that the city is, without exaggeration, the hydrotherapy capital of Iran and one of the region's most reputable wellness brands. He noted that the unique combination of therapeutic services and nature-based tourism on the slopes of Sabalan Mountain has turned Sarein into one of the country's most important destinations for health tourism. He further stated that 15 pool and hot-spring complexes are currently active across the province, and with its well-developed accommodation infrastructure, Ardabil has evolved into a year-round destination for wellness, relaxation, and recovery. He also invited all spa centers, wellness-oriented facilities, and tourism-industry professionals from across the country to take part in the upcoming festival, stressing that Ardabil simultaneously offers visitors treatment, natural beauty, and tranquility.

Secrets of Chega Sofla await further excavation

Iranica Desk

Chega Sofla, first identified in 1971 during a short-term survey by German archaeologists in Behbahan, Khuzestan Province, has long been recognized as a major settlement in the Persian Gulf region. Despite several excavation seasons, archaeologists have yet to reach the site's untouched layers. Current findings, however, suggest the site dates back to the early fifth millennium BCE, according to archaeologist Abbas Moqaddam. He highlighted the tombs of Chega Sofla as the most remarkable discoveries. "The tombs are true eternal homes and afterlife structures," he said. "They are fully architectural, expertly constructed from bricks, and their precise proportions and engineered layouts provide important lessons in ancient funerary architecture." The discovery of the world's first brick tomb at Chega Sofla, dating to the fifth millennium BCE, is considered a key piece of evidence for funerary architecture in southwestern Iran and the wider Persian Gulf civilization, mehrnews.com wrote. Regarding the settlement area, Moqaddam explained that archaeologists uncovered a large sanctuary, complete with a worship platform and an offering platform. On the offering platform, 73 standing stones were found, indicating a deeply religious society in which spiritual and ritual beliefs played a central role. "These findings suggest that Chega Sofla was likely one of the major ritual centers of the fifth millennium BCE," he added. One of the most striking discoveries at the site, Moqaddam said, is the social structure emphasizing the role of women. Of 102 burials identified, more than half belonged to women, suggesting



that women held prominent positions and played key roles in society. Moqaddam illustrated this with a notable burial: alongside a collective grave containing 52 individuals, archaeologists discovered the grave of a 25-year-old woman, whom they named "Khatun." She was buried with great care and accompanied by two symbolic objects—a stone weight and a sword. "This combination evokes the image of the goddess of justice, who

holds a scale and a sword. We believe this woman held authority and played a role in maintaining social order during her life," he said. He also noted that in an 11-person brick tomb, the last individual buried was a woman. Among the deformed skulls recovered, female examples outnumbered males, offering further evidence of a female-centered social structure at Chega Sofla. Highlighting ongoing questions, he stressed the importance of discovering the site's main sanctuary. "We are confident that the central sanctuary exists within the settlement, but it has not yet been uncovered. This makes continued excavation essential," he said. On the economic structure of the community, he added that Chega Sofla was home to skilled artisans — metalworkers, potters, stonecutters, weavers, and other craftsmen — living largely self-sufficient lifestyles. Findings also suggest the community maintained long-distance trade networks, importing raw materials such as obsidian, marble, and metals from distant regions. Moqaddam concluded that Chega Sofla still holds many of its secrets. Its untouched layers, the main sanctuary, and the social and economic details of the community all require further exploration to provide a more complete picture of one of the earliest centers of civilization in the Persian Gulf region.



● destinationiran.com



Iran, UNEP clinch ozone-depleting gases project as sanctions bite

Social Desk

Shina Ansari, Iran's vice president and head of the Department of Environment, clinched a UNEP-backed project on Tuesday to slash ozone-depleting gases across key sectors, UN Environment Programme executive director Inger Andersen announced on the sidelines of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-7) in Nairobi. The deal, rolled out with UNEP financial backing during the December 9-12 summit, targets hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) in refrigeration and foams to meet Iran's Montreal Protocol commitments by 2025, Ansari told IRNA reporters, IRNA reported. She hammered home the sanctions drag. "UN bodies must fast-track green tech transfers and lock in Iran's fair slice of global funding." Droughts, dust storms battering southwest Asia, shrunken wetlands like Hamoun, choked by upstream Afghan dams, and

border water woes topped her pitch to Andersen.

Andersen rued the "unjust sanctions" stifling progress but saluted Iran's dust storm initiative. "UNEP's work stays non-political, tied to our shared fate," she said, pushing to "iron out hurdles" for broader ties.

Iran eyes UNEP muscle on cross-border wetlands and eco-friendly oil flaring fixes amid its green diplomacy drive.

Oman's UNEA-7 president Abdullah bin Ali Al Amri, steering the talks for over 170 ministers, thanked Iran for "constructive backing" that smoothed consensus hunts.

"Iran's input keeps us on track," he told Ansari, with days left to seal resolutions on climate, biodiversity, and plastics.

Ansari hailed Oman's chair as a Persian Gulf win, zeroing in on joint dust fights and Gulf of Oman water pacts via regional conventions.

Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Environ-



Head of Iran's Department of Environment Shina Ansari (R) and Inger Andersen, UN deputy secretary-general and executive director of the UN Environment Programme, hold a memorial plate during a meeting in Tehran, Iran, December 9, 2025.
● IRNA

ment Deborah Mlongo Barasa hosted Ansari talks that greenlit a bilateral eco pact in final Foreign Ministry review. Ansari touted Tehran's edge in ranger training and endangered species safeguards, saying "Huge scope for teamwork."

Barasa sought Iran's heft on global deals and nodded to swift signing, plus her Tehran trip.

UNEA-7, the world's top green decision hub every two years, spotlights planetary meltdown, climate shifts, biodiversity crashes, plastic strangleholds, glacier thaws, algae outbreaks, and AI's eco toll.



Iran's team drives side events on sand and dust storms, plastic treaty drafts, water recycling tech, and sanction carve-outs for pollution curbs.

Tehran, Yerevan set up joint task force to ease tourism bottlenecks

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's deputy tourism chief Anoushirvan Mohseni Bandpey on Tuesday in Tehran announced the creation of a joint taskforce with Armenia to tackle border hurdles at Norduz and design combined travel packages, calling the move "a civilizational step" that could reshape tourism across the Caucasus.

Speaking after a meeting of the Iran-Armenia tourism committee, Mohseni Bandpey stressed that the two neighbors must "clear the bottlenecks" at Norduz in East Azarbaijan province, where long queues of buses and cars have hampered cross-border traffic.

He said the new operational group will streamline ground transit and pave the way for tourists to enjoy seamless journeys "from Tehran to Yerevan, from Jolfa to Lake Sevan."

The deputy minister underlined that tourism should no longer stop at the frontier. "Visitors entering Armenia must be able to continue into Iran with one integrated program, and vice versa," he said, describing the plan as a structural innovation that will en-



rich travel experiences and open new commercial opportunities. On Monday, Mohseni Bandpey met Armenian economy and tourism minister Gevorg Papoyan in Yerevan, where both sides agreed to form a joint commission on border management. He argued that border cooperation is not merely logistical but "a prerequisite for a leap in tourism and wider economic exchanges." "Armenia and Iran are long-time friendly countries, and our co-operation in the tourism sector, especially in recent years, has been steadily developing. In 2024 alone, around 179,000 tourists visited Armenia from Iran, and from January to November 2025, we have already recorded 166,000 visits," Papoyan said, Caspian Post reported.

The Norduz crossing, lying on the busy Tabriz-Jolfa axis, is Iran's sole land customs gate with Ar-

menia and a key link to the Eurasian Economic Union. Officials believe its upgrade could turn East Azarbaijan into a gateway for four-season tourism and regional trade.

"Norduz must evolve from a checkpoint into a service-driven hub," Mohseni Bandpey said, adding that coordinated transport, standardized controls and expanded passenger facilities are essential to meet peak demand. Iran, with its trove of UNESCO-listed heritage sites, and Armenia, with its historic churches and striking landscapes, aim to complement each other by offering joint cultural routes. The talks also covered visa facilitation, private-sector engagement and professional exchanges between the two countries' tourism bodies. Mohseni Bandpey called these measures the "pillars" of future cooperation. "Every step must tangibly improve the traveler's experience. That is our benchmark," he said.

By aligning border policy with tourism strategy, Tehran and Yerevan hope to turn their frontier from a choke point into a corridor of steady, profitable and secure travel.

Iran, Turkey push to widen academic pipeline

Social Desk

Iran's science minister pressed Ankara's envoy on Monday to widen the two neighbors' academic and training pipeline, using a Tehran meeting to call for joint oversight of university standards and new cross-border programs, according to the Science Ministry.

Hossein Simaei-Sarraf told Turkish Ambassador Hicabi Kirlangic that Tehran wants to "open up" its scientific and cultural cooperation with Turkey, arguing that the two countries' shared history and geographic proximity give them room to expand joint research and professional training, IRNA reported.

Simaei-Sarraf said Iran rates foreign universities strictly on regional and global rankings, adding that Turkish institutions fall under the same metrics.

He said Iran's Student Affairs Organization releases an updated list of accredited foreign universities for applicants planning to study abroad. To keep that list current, he urged the creation of a bilateral committee that



Iran's Science Minister Hossein Simaei-Sarraf (R) and Turkish Ambassador Hicabi Kirlangic discuss expansion of academic cooperation in a meeting in Tehran on December 8, 2025.
● IRNA

would sift through rankings and "fine-tune" the roster of approved Turkish schools.

He noted that the list serves as the reference point for whether a degree qualifies for recognition in Iran.

Kirlangic said Ankara aims to "strengthen" its cultural and academic ties with Iran and wants tangible channels for faculty exchange, joint chairs, and dual-degree tracks. Both sides discussed setting up shared academic departments, expanding research centers, and easing bureaucratic frictions for students moving in either direction.

The Turkish envoy raised complaints about border procedures for Turkish students enrolled in Iranian universities. In response, Iran's deputy science minister, who also heads the Student Affairs Organization, Saeed Habiba said Tehran

had already coordinated with the border police and other agencies to ensure smooth entry and exit. Turkish students, he said, "won't face hurdles" at crossing points.

Simaei-Sarraf proposed that universities and research institutes in both countries branch into collaborative work across literature, hard sciences, and technology fields.

He said long-term joint projects could anchor a "durable and productive" scientific partnership.

Both delegations signaled readiness to draft multi-year cooperation plans, including structured faculty exchanges, shared labs, and coordinated curricula. The ministry said the two sides want to move beyond ad hoc academic contacts and build a predictable framework that can draw students and researchers on a larger scale.

US Award of Merit for Iran's 'The Supporter' at Accolade Global Film Competition

Social Desk

Iranian filmmaker Leila Noee clinched the Award of Merit at the 22nd Accolade Global Film Competition in California for her short drama 'The Supporter,' produced with Roham Rasouli. Noee, wrote and directed the 20-minute film that traces the story of an elderly man who refuses to leave wartime Tehran despite his family's pleas.

His decision, tied to a haunting past, drives the narrative. "It's a choice that binds him to memory," the director said after the announcement.

Founded in 2003, the Accolade Global Film Competition has carved out a niche for independent cinema. Each year it hands out three honors, Award of Merit, Best of Show and Award of Recognition – across categories ranging from shorts to docu-

mentaries.

MovieMaker Magazine ranks the event among the world's top 25 festivals for its artistic value.

'The Supporter' had earlier been selected by Iran's Young Cinema Society in its "Homeland Through My Eyes" campaign and screened at the "Embrace Iran" showcase.

The cast includes Mohammad Taghinejad and Mahro Zeraatkar, while international distri-

bution is managed by Varcana Productions, a boutique outfit specializing in Middle Eastern works.

The win marks a breakthrough for Noee and Rasouli, who financed the project independently. "Independent cinema thrives on grit and persistence," Rasouli said, calling the recognition "a shot in the arm" for Iranian short films seeking global audiences.

