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Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian (2nd L) meets with the family of Razmik Khachatorian, an Iranian soldier of Armenian Christian faith who fell during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, on Christmas Day in Tehran on December 25, 2025. president.ir

Arsonist posing as firefighter: Washington's 'talks' offer is a threat, not diplomacy



By Ali Karimi Magham
International relations expert

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

There is a particular kind of insolence that only an empire in decline can still afford: the insolence of burning down a house and then swaggering back to the smoldering ruins to offer "assistance"—on the condition that the homeowner surrenders the deed, the keys, and the right to rebuild. This week at the UN Security Council, Morgan Ortagus, introduced as the Trump administration's deputy Middle East envoy, delivered exactly that brand of insolence. "The United States remains available for formal talks with Iran," she

said, "but only if Tehran is prepared for direct and meaningful dialogue." Then came the real message, stripped of diplomacy's lipstick: "Foremost, there can be no enrichment inside of Iran, and that remains our principle." Let us translate this for those who still cling to the mirage of "engagement" as if it were a charm against American coercion. Washington's idea of "direct and meaningful dialogue" is not a conversation. It is a summons. It is not negotiations. It is capitulation, packaged in the language of reasonableness. "No enrichment inside of Iran." Not limits. Not verification. Not reciprocal steps. Not a balanced arrangement anchored in rights and obligations. A flat prohibition. A demand that a sovereign nation renounce an internationally recognized component of a peaceful nuclear program, even as the very states is-

suing the demand sit atop vast arsenals, fuel cycles, and—when convenient—selective "exceptions" for their preferred allies. In other words, the United States has not returned to the table; it has returned to the podium. And yet, there remains a troubling faction at home—call them the incurable optimists, the professional "dialogue" class, or simply the perpetually surprised—who treat every American threat as a "new opening." They hear a conditional offer and imagine a ladder out of pressure. They hear a diktat and call it "a starting point." They speak of "trust-building" as though trust were built by the party that walked away first, imposed collective punishment next, and now claims moral authority over the wreckage it created. The record is not ambiguous. Under the

JCPOA, Iran accepted the most intrusive verification regime in modern nuclear diplomacy, implemented commitments in good faith, and was rewarded with what—exactly? A US exit, European paralysis, and a global banking system terrorized into compliance with Washington's extraterritorial bullying. The E3, draped in elegant rhetoric, proved incapable—or unwilling—to deliver the economic normalization they promised. They signed with one hand and apologized with the other. Then, after undermining the very agreement they now mourn in op-eds and conference panels, Washington and its European companions have the audacity to present themselves as "firefighters." They lecture Iran about responsibility while ignoring their own signature crime: the deliberate destruction of a functioning diplomatic framework for

domestic political spectacle and strategic convenience. The arsonist now holds a hose—filled with gasoline—and demands applause for his "concern." What is new is not the American posture. What is new is that, at the Security Council, the empire's script is no longer met with automatic deference. The rift is visible, and it matters. China and Russia, for their own reasons and interests, placed their weight behind Iran's position on the illegality of the so-called "snapback" mechanism as brandished by those who violated, abandoned, or hollowed out the JCPOA. They refused to sanctify the logic that says: you can renege on your obligations, sabotage the bargain, and still claim the privileges of the very agreement you dismantled. That is not law; it is vandalism dressed as procedure.

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Araghchi: US pursuing 'law of jungle' over diplomacy

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated that the United States pursues "the law of jungle" over diplomacy, resorting to force and sanctions to advance its interests.

Araghchi made the statements while addressing a host of students and academics at Russia's MGIMO University last week. The Foreign Ministry released his remarks on Friday, Press TV reported.

In his address, the minister stressed that the international system is "unfortunately moving toward disorder." "After the establishment of the United Nations, countries tried to create an order based on international law and regulations, but what we are witnessing today, especially in the new policies of the US government, is a disregard for laws and a replacement with force and power," Araghchi said.

Iran's top diplomat added that US President Donald Trump's foreign policy is based on "peace through force", while humanity has been trying for years to achieve peace through diplomacy and law.

"Peace through force means that whoever has greater power imposes their

will on others; this is 'the law of jungle,'" he explained.

The Iranian minister further said that Washington is not only "intervening anywhere in the world, carrying out attacks, conducting assassinations and imposing sanctions", but also giving its ally in West Asia, Israel, a green light to "act freely in violation of all international laws."

"In recent years, Israel has attacked several regional countries, and tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, with genocide ongoing, but, unfortunately, the US and some European countries have remained silent," he said.

Araghchi also referred to the June attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, which are under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, as "one of the biggest violations of international law."

"These are examples of the lawlessness in the international system that is pushing the world towards greater insecurity."

Unlike the past, Araghchi said, the US is now explicitly acknowledging the use of force. He pointed out that "While we



Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (C) speaks during a visit to Russia's MGIMO University on December 17, 2025.

● IRNA

were negotiating, we were attacked, and then we were asked to engage in negotiations based on surrender. Even the President of the United States explicitly called for [Iran's] 'unconditional surrender.'"

However, he stressed that Iran's resistance and response to the aggression managed to force Washington and Israel to "shift from demanding surrender to seeking an unconditional ceasefire."

"We decided to resist and utilized our capabilities, including our defensive and missile capabilities. Our armed forces gave a decisive response. While it is said that the sky over Iran was within the enemy's reach, it is not mentioned that the sky over the occupied territories was also within the range of Iranian missiles."

"This experience shows that in the current international system, countries have no choice but to be powerful,"



Araghchi emphasized. Supported by the United States, Israel conducted an aggression on Iran on June 13, a few days before the sixth round of indirect nuclear talks between Tehran and Washington.

More than a week later, the United States also entered the war by bombing

three Iranian nuclear sites in a grave violation of the United Nations Charter, international law, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

On June 24, Iran, through its successful retaliatory operations against both the Israeli regime and the US, managed to impose a halt to the illegal assault.

Deputy FM: Anti-Iran enmity rooted in Islamic Establishment, not nuclear program

International Desk

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi said on Thursday that enmity towards Iran did not stem from its nuclear program, but from the Islamic nature of its ruling Islamic Establishment, the country's independence, and its progress.

Gharibabadi stressed that attacks by Israel on civilians and residential areas during its aggression against Iran in June demonstrated that the nuclear issue was merely a pretext for targeting the country. Addressing a group of instructors of the Qom Seminary, Gharibabadi noted that the indirect negotiations with the new American administration that preceded the war, were being conducted with complete mistrust of Washington and alongside full preparedness to confront any potential military action.



Kazem Gharibabadi

● IRNA

He noted that, given the state of wariness, diplomacy and defensive preparedness proceeded in parallel and in coordination throughout the negotiation period.

Reiterating absence of any link between the war and the nuclear issue, the official said Iran's enemies had been preparing for the aggression for many years. He reminded that in addition to targeting innocent civilians and residential areas, the war took aim at parts of Iran's infrastructure.

According to Gharibabadi,

Israel and the United States suffered a complete failure in their military action and stopped short of achieving their strategic objectives.

The Islamic Republic, in turn, inflicted heavy and painful blows on the regime, to the point that it was forced to seek a ceasefire, he stated.

The official also described Iran's forceful strike on a US military base in retaliation to Washington's cooperation with the regime in the war, served as a clear sign of the country's strength. Gharibabadi, meanwhile, noted that the creation of international consensus to condemn the aggressors, national unity and cohesion inside Iran in the face of the strikes, and regional countries' acknowledgment that the regime represented the main threat to the region, were among the most important issues that had to be highlighted when assessing the 12-day war.

US targets Daesh in Nigeria after Trump warns of attacks on Christians

Nigeria: Terrorists target both Muslims, Christians



● AP

International Desk

The United States carried out a strike against Daesh terrorists in Nigeria, claiming the group had been targeting Christians in the region.

Camps run by the group in Sokoto state, which lies on Nigeria's border with Niger, were hit, the US military said, adding that an "initial assessment" suggested "multiple" fatalities. US President Donald Trump said the Christmas Day strikes were "powerful and deadly" and labelled the group "terrorist scum", saying it had been "targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians".

Nigeria's government confirmed the attacks but dismissed Trump's assertions, saying armed groups target both Muslim and Christian

communities in the country, and US claims that Christians face persecution do not represent a complex security situation and ignore efforts by Nigerian authorities to safeguard religious freedom. The director of the non-profit Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) also dismissed Trump's narrative that a strike was necessary to prevent a "slaughter" of Christians in Nigeria. "Muslims are being killed and harassed every day by the same criminals," Auwal Musa Rafsanjani was quoted as saying by the local Leadership news outlet. "This conversation should be about human life, not religion or geography," Rafsanjani said. Nigerians of any religion are victims of terrorism and warned that claiming otherwise could ignite ethnic or

religious tensions.

The director stressed that any intervention, local or foreign, must prioritize accuracy, accountability and protection of innocent lives. The US military's Africa Command said the strike was carried out in Sokoto state and killed multiple Daesh terrorists. Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Mai-tama Tuggar told BBC the strike was a "joint operation" targeting "terrorists", and it "has nothing to do with a particular religion".

Without naming Daesh specifically, Tuggar said the operation had been planned "for quite some time" and had used intelligence information provided by the Nigerian side. He did not rule out further strikes, adding that this depended on "decisions to be taken by the leadership of the two countries". Tuggar said the strikes had been planned "for quite some time" and had used intelligence information provided by Nigeria. He also did not rule out further strikes.

The Nigerian government has for several years been fighting a complex network of terrorist groups, which includes Boko Haram and Daesh-linked splinter groups, but largely in the north-east of the country, hundreds of miles away from Sokoto state.

Russia holds memorial for Gen. Soleimani on 5th martyrdom anniversary



A memorial ceremony is held in the Russian capital Moscow on December 25, 2025 to commemorate Iranian Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani who was assassinated by the United States in Iraq in 2020.

● IRNA

International Desk

A memorial ceremony was held in Russian capital on Thursday to commemorate Iranian Lieutenant General Qassem Soleima-

ni who was assassinated by the United States in Iraq in 2020.

The event, titled "Spiritual Unity of the Peoples of Russia and Iran," was organized by the All-Russian People's Union and

attended by Iran's Ambassador to Moscow, Kazem Jalali, along with a number of Russian scholars and intellectuals.

Addressing the ceremony, the adviser to the head of RosGeo, Russia's largest state-owned geological holding Dmitry Malyshev praised the late Iranian anti-terror commander Soleimani for his exceptional valor, honesty, and wisdom.

Malyshev noted that the ceremony coincided with the fifth anniversary of General Soleimani's assassination, adding that participants were remembering heroes who, like Soleimani, served humanity.

"One could even say this occasion is a celebration for us," Malyshev said, "because Qassem

Soleimani is still with us today." General Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and their companions were assassinated in a US drone strike authorized by US President Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Calling General Soleimani's loss a tremendous tragedy, Malyshev said it was accurate to describe him as the victim of a terrorist act.

He concluded by saying that those responsible for the assassination — both those who carried it out and those who ordered it — would ultimately be held accountable.

Sergey Baburin, a former deputy of the Russian State Duma, said the assassination of General Soleimani was a very clear violation of international regulations, criticizing the silence of the international community towards the terrorist act.

Despite Trump's claiming responsibility for the assassination, the advocates of international law did not condemn the US move.

Özgür Bursali, Secretary-General of Turkey's Patriotic Party, was another speaker at the event who said General Soleimani had left behind "a very great legacy," adding his path continues to be followed. He described Iran as resisting "imperialism and Zionism in

a heroic manner," and said the party believes Soleimani was assassinated on this path, but that "thousands of other Soleimanis were born" as a result.

Bursali also argued that the world is approaching "the end of US hegemony and the power structure designed after World War II."

General Soleimani was highly revered across West Asia because of his key role in fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Two days after his assassination, Iraqi lawmakers approved a bill that required the government to end the presence of all foreign military forces led by the US in the country.

Second unit of Iran’s largest oil processing facility opens in West Karoun

South Azadegan crude processing capacity hits 160,000 bpd: Minister

Economy Desk

The Islamic Republic opened on Thursday the second unit of its largest central oil processing facility in the West Karoun region, lifting crude oil processing capacity to about 160,000 barrels per day, after President Masoud Pezeshkian issued the launch order via video conference. Pezeshkian on Thursday morning officially ordered the operation of the second unit of the country’s largest Central Oil Treatment Plant (CTEP) during an online ceremony, marking a key step in expanding oil processing capacity in the strategic West Karoun fields, president.ir reported.

The CTEP is a strategic infrastructure project of the National Iranian Oil Company designed to provide sustainable capacity for processing, transporting and stabilizing crude oil from the South Azadegan field and neighboring oilfields. During the ceremony, Oil Minister

Mohsen Paknejad said that with the launch of the second processing train at the shared South Azadegan field, total crude oil processing capacity has reached about 160,000 barrels per day.

“The Central Oil Treatment Plant of the shared South Azadegan field (CTEP) is the country’s largest oil and gas processing unit, comprising four processing trains with a total crude oil processing capacity of 320,000 barrels per day, or 80,000 barrels per day per train, along with around 200 million cubic feet of associated gas, part of which is currently being flared due to incomplete processing capacity,” Paknejad said.

He noted that the first processing train of the facility was launched earlier this year, (which began on March 21). “With the commissioning of the second train on Thursday, total crude oil processing capacity has reached around 160,000 barrels per day, while the remaining two trains

are expected to come online in the coming months,” he added. The project serves as a key link between production and development phases in West Karoun and plays a central role in ensuring sustainable and conservation-oriented oil production from shared fields. It is considered the main artery for oil processing and transportation in the West Karoun region and also provides the groundwork for boosting output from other nearby fields.

Spanning 70 hectares, the project focuses on three key pillars: crude oil processing and desalting, gathering and compression of associated petroleum gas, and management and treatment of produced wastewater with reinjection. Its ultimate goal is to achieve a stable processing capacity of 320,000 barrels per day in the main operational phase of South Azadegan. The CTEP project cost more than \$350 million, with 85% of the equipment sourced domestically.



Northern Gasp, South Azadegan Oil Field
● SHANA

Its launch has created 1,500 direct jobs and 2,500 indirect jobs, including 700 positions filled by local workers.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, Pezeshkian praised the efforts of the Oil Ministry and engineers involved in the

project and expressed hope that the same determination would continue to deliver further results at a similar pace.

Veep: Expanded energy trade to turn Iran into regional hub

Economy Desk

First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref said on Friday that the Islamic Republic plans to position itself as a regional center for energy exchanges by expanding energy trade with the Eurasian Economic Union and neighboring countries.

“By developing energy trade with the Eurasian Union as well as countries in the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran will become a regional energy trading hub,” Aref said at the second meeting of the Regional Energy Trade Steering Committee, his website, fvpresident.ir, reported.

The meeting, chaired by Aref, reviewed measures and programs aimed at transforming Iran into a regional center for energy exchanges, with participants holding discussions on the steps required to achieve that goal.

Aref also underscored the Islamic Republic’s neighborhood-oriented foreign policy and the government’s focus on expanding relations and cooperation with regional countries, alongside an active presence in major regional pacts and unions.

During the session, plans, actions and policy measures to expand and upgrade energy co-



operation with member states of the Eurasian Economic Union and countries in the region were reviewed and decided upon, in line with the provisions and objectives of Iran’s Seventh Five-Year Development Plan (SDP). The discussions took into account Iran’s strategic position in the region and the need to make effective use of the country’s geopolitical capacities to support its goal of becoming a regional energy trading center. The first meeting of the committee was held in March 2025. Under Article 44 of the SDP, the committee was formed within six months of the law’s enactment to help turn Iran into a

regional energy hub. The plan targets annual gas exports and imports of 40 billion cubic meters and 20 billion cubic meters, respectively. It also seeks to facilitate the swap of oil products and crude oil from Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries at a rate of 200,000 barrels per day and electricity exchanges of at least 20 billion kilowatt-hours annually.

First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref (2nd R) chairs the second meeting of the Regional Energy Trade Steering Committee, in Tehran, on December 26, 2025.
● fvpresident.ir

Iran unveils Mideast’s largest EAF transformer, boosting steel self-reliance

Economy Desk

Iran unveiled the Middle East’s largest electric arc furnace (EAF) transformer, with a capacity of 210 megavolt-amperes (MVA), in Semnan Province, achieving self-reliance in a core component of its steel industry, Bahram Sobhani, head of the Iranian Steel Producers Association (ISPA), said Friday at the inauguration ceremony.

The event was held at the Arya Transfo Shahmirzad industrial complex in Semnan Province, with the attendance of the head and members of Parliament’s Economic Committee and Mohammad Javad Kolivand, the provincial governor, IRNA reported.

“The largest EAF transformer in the Middle East, with a capacity of 210 MVA, along with 33 MVA ladle furnace (LF) transformers and a 40 MVA series reactor — both domestically produced — were unveiled on order from the country’s steel industry,” Sobhani said.

He noted that Iran previously sourced up to 90% of its required transformers for the steel sector from Italy.



“The domestic production of this transformer shows that Iran’s steel industry is now independent from imports of these vital and foundational pieces of equipment,” he added.

Sobhani described the transformer as “the heart of a steel plant,” valued at up to 5 million euros, “which has now been localized.” He explained that the full design and manufacturing of this critical transformer were carried out by Iranian scientists using domestic technology at the Arya Transfo industrial group in Semnan, commissioned by Iran’s steel producers, with limited advisory support

from Italian consultants in certain sections.

“The continuation of orders and production of these EAF transformers will make the country’s steel industry independent from imports,” Sobhani said.

“There is nothing in Iran that we cannot build, and massive equipment is producible through the efforts of capable Iranian engineers and workers. Steel complex construction in Iran began in the 1970s with Italian collaboration, and Khorasan and Saba steel plants — with about 50% domestic content — marked the beginning of localizing the steel industry,” he added.

Arsonist posing as ...

The “snapback” debate is more than a legal quarrel. It is the core of the Western approach to international commitments: agreements are binding when they constrain others, optional when they restrain the West. Mechanisms are “rules-based” when they serve Atlantic power, “technicalities” when they do not. The Security Council, long used as a stage for selective indignation, is increasingly forced to confront the contradiction between Western slogans and Western conduct. And here is where our domestic illu-

sionists must finally grow up: the United States is not offering Iran “talks.” It is offering Iran a ritual of submission designed to validate coercion as diplomacy. “No enrichment inside of Iran” is not a negotiating position; it is a declaration that Iran has no rights worth recognizing. It is the language of domination. It says, in effect: you may exist, but only under our terms; you may develop, but only at the permission of those who have sanctioned, threatened, and attacked your region for decades. When Washington demands “direct talks,” it is not because it respects Iran.

It is because it wants the optics of a bilateral confrontation: a superpowered “reasonably” insisting, and a targeted state “unreasonably” resisting. The next act is always the same: pressure, escalation, and then a manufactured headline about Iran’s “refusal,” as though refusing humiliation were a moral failing. Those still peddling the fantasy of an American “guarantee” should answer one simple question: which America will sign? The America that promises today and breaks tomorrow? The America whose administrations reverse one another like clockwork? The Amer-

ica that treats its own signature as a disposable napkin? When a state turns agreements into campaign props, what is the value of its word? Iran has already run the experiment. It has already paid the tuition for this lesson, in economic pain and strategic risk. To demand that the nation repeat the same mistake is not pragmatism; it is amnesia marketed as sophistication. Diplomacy is not begging for a handshake from the very hand that tightens the noose. Diplomacy is reciprocity, enforceable commitments, and respect for sovereignty. If Washington and the E3

want a deal, the route is obvious: return to obligations, lift the coercive measures that violate the spirit and letter of what was promised, and stop treating Iranian rights as bargaining chips. Until then, Iran should treat “talks” conditioned on surrender as what they are: a threat delivered with a smile. The arsonist has no credibility as a firefighter. And those who still insist on inviting him back into the house—despite the ashes underfoot—should be honest about what they are proposing: not diplomacy, but submission wrapped in nostalgia.

Tehran's interests in Central Asia

Goals, challenges, and opportunities



By Muhammad Shamaududinov

Expert on international affairs

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

On December 11 of this year, the president of Iran made an official visit to Kazakhstan in Astana, highlighting Tehran's growing focus on Central Asia amid intensifying global competition. For Kazakhstan and its neighbors, the visit underscored why the region matters to Iran and the opportunities and constraints shaping that engagement. Central Asia has become an increasingly dynamic arena, firmly on the radar of major powers. Over the past year, high-level summits in the C5+1 format were held with the European Union (EU), China, Russia, and the United States, followed by Japan on December 19–20. Turkey and Azerbaijan have also strengthened their presence, including through the October summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and Azerbaijan's accession as a full member of the consultative meetings of Central Asian heads of state.

Therefore, Iran cannot afford to ignore developments north of its borders. Growing international attention to Central Asia is prompting Tehran to intensify its political, economic, and diplomatic engagement in the region.

One of Iran's primary interests in Central Asia is to ease its long-standing political, diplomatic, and economic isolation. Strengthening its position in Central Asia would provide Tehran with the diplomatic support it urgently needs and, to some extent, an economic breakthrough from the blockade.

During talks in Astana, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian expressed concern over the escalation of international conflicts and the impact of sanctions. Tokayev noted that Kazakhstan's and Iran's positions often align on the international stage. While no specific situations were cited, such statements carry particular weight for Tehran in the context of its recent war with Israel and the US and the broader tensions that persist.

Sanctions continue to constrain Iran's trade and economy, increasing the importance of access to Central Asian markets and the development of transport and logistics links. During the visit, the two leaders agreed to increase bilateral trade to \$3 billion, up from \$340 million in 2024. Pezeshkian said trade had grown by 40%, while Tokayev noted that more than 350 enterprises with Iranian capital operate in Kazakhstan. Iran is also looking to Central Asia as a bridge to the vast markets of China and Russia. Tehran seeks to deepen trade and logistics connectivity across Eurasia, and Central Asia is central to that ambition. Existing routes, including the North-South corridor and the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway, have seen freight volumes rise by 53% in the first 10 months of the year. In May, the first regular China-Iran freight train began operating via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, further underscoring the region's transit role.

Moreover, Iran has long been concerned about security threats from the north, particularly from Central Asia. Tehran closely monitors any growth of NATO influence in the region. The strengthening of US positions after the November summit with Central Asian leaders, Turkey's deepening military cooperation with the region, and Kazakhstan's joining of the Abraham Accords — all viewed negatively in Iran — have inten-



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (2nd-R) shakes hands with top-ranking Kazakh officials, while his Kazakh counterpart Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (R) watches, during the former's visit to Astana, Kazakhstan, on December 11, 2025.

president.ir

sified the country's security concerns. Consequently, Iran needs to bolster its political and diplomatic engagement in Central Asia to counterbalance these developments.

Constraints, opportunities for Central Asia

Despite mutual interests, Iran's engagement with Central Asia is shaped by a mix of structural constraints and emerging opportunities that directly affect the region. International sanctions remain the main limiting factor, constraining trade, investment, and connectivity projects important for Central Asia's external outreach.

Kazakhstan-Iran trade illustrates the impact: bilateral turnover reached \$2 billion in 2008 but declined sharply after sanctions tightened in the early 2010s, hitting a historic low of \$300 million in 2019.

Sanctions have also affected infrastructure and energy initiatives relevant to Central Asia's connectivity. The blocking of a gas swap deal involving Iran, Turkmenistan, and Iraq, as well as renewed

restrictions on Iran's Chabahar port — a potential gateway for Central Asian states to the open ocean — underscore the vulnerability of regional transit ambitions to external political pressure. Even so, several factors create openings for Iran to intensify engagement with Central Asia.

The gradual shift toward a multipolar world and the growing role of alternative formats such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS have expanded diplomatic and economic maneuvering room across Eurasia. SCO membership allows Iran to strengthen its regional position and gain support from Central Asian countries internationally. Iran's full membership in the SCO and the entry into force of a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, have already translated into increased trade flows, boosting trade by 35% in the first two months since May. At the same time, ongoing regional uncertainties are prompting Central Asian states to place greater emphasis

on diversifying transport and logistics routes. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have disrupted southern routes, while recent attacks on the Caspian Pipeline Consortium have highlighted the importance of flexibility in regional connectivity.

Cultural and historical proximity represents another avenue for strengthening ties between Central Asia and Iran. During the Astana visit, President Tokayev noted that approximately 4% of Kazakh words have Persian roots and highlighted joint work with historical archives. Agreements to expand cultural cooperation, along with Iran's long-standing cultural engagement in Tajikistan, further illustrate this dimension of regional interaction.

Taken together, Iran can no longer afford to overlook Central Asia without risking economic, political, diplomatic, and strategic losses. While significant barriers remain, Tehran has distinct advantages that could enable it to strengthen its position in the region if it invests sustained attention and resources.



Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Farzaneh Sadegh Malvajerdi (2nd-L) talks with the Transport Minister of Kazakhstan Nurlan Sauranbayev (L) during a high-ranking visit to Astana, Kazakhstan, on December 11, 2025, while a map of transit corridors in Central Asia is displayed behind them.

mrud.ir



The gradual shift toward a multipolar world and the growing role of alternative formats such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS have expanded diplomatic and economic maneuvering room across Eurasia. SCO membership allows Iran to strengthen its regional position and gain support from Central Asian countries internationally. Iran's full membership in the SCO and the entry into force of a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, have already translated into increased trade flows, boosting trade by 35% in the first two months since May.

Turkey, Iran unite against Israel as regional power dynamics shift

By Dorian Jones
Journalist

PERSPECTIVE

For years, regional rivalries have limited cooperation between Turkey and Iran. Now, shared security concerns over Israel are providing common ground. During a recent Tehran visit, the Turkish foreign minister called Israel the region's "biggest threat". Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, hosted in Tehran by his Iranian counterpart, Abbas Araghchi, declared that both countries see "Israel as the biggest threat to stability in the Middle East" because of its "expansionist policies". Ankara is increasingly angry over Israel's military operations in Syria, which it considers a threat to security. Syria's new regime is a close Turkish ally. With the Iranian-backed Syrian regime overthrown and Iran's diminishing influence in the Caucasus, another region of competition with Turkey, Tehran is viewed by Ankara as less of a threat. "Ankara sees that Tehran's wings are clipped, and I'm sure that it is also very happy that Tehran's wings are clipped," international relations expert Soli Ozel told RFI. Ozel predicts that perceived diminished Iranian power is opening the door for more cooperation with Turkey.

Cooperation
"Competition and cooperation really define the relations. Now, ... the rela-

tionship is more balanced. But there are limits, driven by America's approach to Iran," said Ozel. Murat Aslan of the SETA Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research, a Turkish pro-government think tank, points out that changing dynamics inside Iran also give an impetus to Turkish diplomatic efforts towards Tehran. "Iran is trying to build a new landscape in which they can communicate with the West, but under the conditions they have identified," observes Aslan. "In this sense, Turkey may contribute. So that's why Turkey is negotiating or communicating with Iran just to find the terms of a probable common consensus." However, warming relations between Turkey and Iran are not viewed in a favourable light by Israel, whose ministers have, in turn, accused Turkey of being Israel's biggest threat. Tensions are rising over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's strong support of Hamas, which Ankara's Western allies have designated as a terrorist organisation. "Obviously, Israel does not want to see Iranian and Turkish relations warm as Israel sees Iran as an existential threat and hence anything that helps Iran is problematic from Israel's perspective," warns Turkey analyst Gallia Lindensstrauss at the Institute for National Security Studies in Al-Quds (Tel Aviv). This month, Israeli security forces accused Hamas of operating a major



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (front-left) talks to his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan, during the 51st session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul, Turkey, on June 21, 2025, toward the end of the Israeli-imposed 12-day war on Iran. ● YASIN AKGUL/AFP

financial operation in Turkey under Iranian supervision. Many of Hamas' senior members are believed to reside in Istanbul.

American ally
Israeli concerns over Turkey's improving Iranian ties will likely be exacerbated with Turkish officials confirming that a visit by President Erdogan to Iran has been "agreed in principle". Ankara also has a delicate balancing act to make sure its Iranian dealings don't risk antagonising its American ally, given ongoing tensions between Tehran

and Washington. Good relations with Washington are vital to Ankara as it looks to US President Donald Trump to help ease tensions with Israel. "For Israel, the United States shapes the environment right now," observes Aslan. "The Turkish preference is to have an intelligence diplomacy with Israelis, not to have an emerging conflict, but rely on the American mediation and facilitation to calm down the situation," added Aslan.

The article first appeared on Radio France Internationale (RFI).



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Iran's first-ever SCO military exercise solidifies ties with China, Russia

By Eva Seiwert
Expert on Chinese affairs

OPINION

Iran recently hosted militaries from China, India, Russia, and six other countries for the first-ever Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) military exercise on Iranian soil. The five-day "Sahand-2025" exercise in the northwest of the country was more than a counter-terrorism drill. It sent a clear geopolitical signal of Tehran's full integration into the multilateral partnership led by China and Russia, illustrating how Beijing and Moscow now see Iran as a valuable participant in their broader regional projects that sit alongside Western formats.

China no longer worried about being seen as Iran's ally
China, for its part, remains wary of unconditionally backing Tehran for fear of unwanted conflicts or disrupted oil flows as a result of Iran's predilections — expanding its role across the Middle East, engaging in hostile actions against Israel, and, perhaps most crucially, maintaining a nuclear program that could encourage Tehran to ignore its nuclear non-proliferation obligations. But the recent military field operations, tactical maneuvers, and joint command exercises from December 1 to 5 were an achievement for a country long isolated by UN sanctions and reflect China's decisive shift in posture: Beijing is no longer worried about being seen as too closely aligned with Iran and now sees value in upgrading ties on several fronts. Until the mid-2010s, Beijing was re-



Iranian and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) officials meet before another day of the Sahand-2025 joint counter-terrorism drill starts in East Azerbaijan Province, Iran. The exercise ran for five days from December 1, 2025. ● SAEID SADEGHI/ISNA

luctant to engage more deeply with the Islamic Republic of Iran politically and militarily. At a time when it was still much keener on good relations with both the US and Europe, China's caution stemmed from concerns over Tehran's global reputation as a pariah state, ongoing international sanctions, and its strong anti-American posture. Iran's long-standing rivalry with Saudi Arabia further complicated matters as Beijing worried that any conflict could endanger oil shipments from two of its largest suppliers.

Tehran's largest trading partner, intent on expanding ties
But Iran's willingness to limit its nuclear program under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which China helped negotiate, the intensifying US-China rivalry, and Beijing's need to diversify its energy have increased the benefits of strengthening ties with Tehran. China's success

in easing Iran-Saudi tensions in 2023 further lowered perceived risks. According to Chinese commentators, US President Donald Trump's withdrawal

from the JCPOA in 2018 and his more adversarial stance towards China, Russia, and Iran were decisive factors leading to the deepening ties among the three states. This culminated in Iran joining the SCO in 2023 and the BRICS grouping a year later. China is today not only Tehran's largest trading partner — accounting for some 90 percent of Iran's oil exports — but also intent on expanding ties. At the same time, Russia — China's close partner and the other driving force of both the SCO and BRICS — appears to have become an even more important security partner for Iran. Moscow has reportedly sold attack helicopters, air defense systems, and fighter jets to Tehran. The three countries together regularly engage in trilateral naval drills as well as broader security coordination, including nuclear consultations. Sahand-2025 has solidified Iran's relations with China and Russia

by showing Iran can play a useful role within the SCO security structures, opening the way for deepening security cooperation.

SCO, BRICS strengthened Iran's geopolitical standing
Iran's entry into the SCO and BRICS added a new institutional dimension to its partnerships with Beijing and Moscow. It allows Tehran to act as a full-fledged member of the world's largest regional organization and benefit from political legitimacy, expanded diplomatic networks, intelligence sharing — including access to the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure's (RATS) anti-terror database, as well as exchanges on cyber threats, border security, and counter-terrorism practices — and to participate in high-level economic and security discussions. This strengthens Iran's geopolitical standing, signaling to both regional rivals and global powers that Tehran is integrated into alternative international frameworks beyond Western-dominated institutions. For Europe, the nuclear implications are particularly important: Iran's closer integration with China and Russia gives it diplomatic backing and economic buffers that reduce the effectiveness of Western pressure. While Beijing is keen for Iran not to escalate its nuclear activities towards weaponization, China's strategic priorities mean it is unlikely to exert the kind of sustained pressure Europe prefers. The result is a geopolitical environment in which Iran feels less isolated — and may therefore be less inclined to rein in its nuclear program.



A Russian military general observes his surroundings during the Sahand-2025 counter-terrorism drill, hosted by Iran's Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC) with the participation of members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province in December 2025. ● SAEID SADEGHI/ISNA

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National Freestyle Senior Championships: Goleij wins 97kg gold to emerge as contender for Wrestling Worlds spot

Sports Desk

Mojtaba Goleij threw down the gauntlet to Hassan Yazdani and Amirali Azarpira over Iran's 97kg slot for next September's World Championships after claiming gold at the National Freestyle Wrestling Championships on Thursday.

Serving as the opening phase of the country's World Championships trials, the three-day event crowned 10 champions across different weight classes in Tabriz, who introduced themselves as contenders for a place in Iran's freestyle squad for Manama, Bahrain.

A world bronze medalist in 2021, Goleij rebounded from his defeat to Yazdani in the Iranian Premier League final a fortnight ago, defeating Alireza Rekabi 9-2 in the 97kg showdown.

Two-time world silver medalist Amirmohammad Yazdani also finished on a high note in a new weight category, edging Amirhossein Hosseini 6-5 to claim the 74kg gold.

Ali Yahyapour capped off his 57kg campaign with a 10-5 victory over Mahdi Veisi in a thrilling final, while 2021 world silver medalist Alireza Sarlak bounced back from a semifinal loss to Veisi to settle for a shared bronze medal alongside Amir Parasteh.



⬆️ Mojtaba Goleij (red) goes for a single-leg takedown against Alireza Rekabi in the 97kg final at the National Freestyle Wrestling Senior Championships in Tabriz, Iran, on December 25, 2025.

● FARSHAD BANDANI/IAWFIR

Peyman Nemati secured the 65kg title courtesy of a 3-0 win against Morteza Hajmollamohammadi in the final. Former Asian champion Ali Savadkouhi – best remembered for his stunning victory over American great Jordan Burroughs at the

2022 Freestyle World Cup – overcame Sajjad Gholami 7-2 in the 86kg final.

There were a couple of upsets on the final day of the competition, as Sina Khalili and Mohammad-Mobin Azimi had to settle for silver medals in their respec-

tive divisions.

A winner of senior Asian bronze and world under-23 silver earlier this year, Khalili suffered a setback in his bid for a national team spot after a narrow 2-1 loss to world U20 bronze medalist Ebrahim

Elahi in the 70kg final.

Reigning world U23 champion Azimi, meanwhile, enjoyed an emphatic run at 92kg before suffering a criteria loss (7-7) to Asian 86kg champion Abolfazl Rahmani in the final.

In the 61kg division, Reza

Momeni stayed on course for a third successive appearance at the World Championships thanks to a 5-1 win over Mahdi Rahimi in the final.

Young Iranian prodigy Mahdi Yousefi, who has won four international medals – including world U20 and senior Asian golds – over the past 12 months, continued his impressive rise with a 4-2 victory over Adel Panahian in the 79kg final, boosting his chances of securing Iran's slot in Manama.

Morteza Janmohammadzadeh brought the curtain down on an action-packed three days in the northwestern Iranian city with a 5-2 victory over Mohammad Alitabar in the 125kg final.

The National Greco-Roman Senior Championships were held in Ahvaz last week, marking the start of Iran's quest to determine its national team lineup in the discipline.

Mohammad Hosseinvand Panahi (55kg), Pouya Nasserpour (60kg), former world champion Meisam Dalkhani (63kg), Mohammad Kamali (67kg), Mohammad-Javad Rezaei (72kg), Ali Oskou (77kg), Mohammad-Amin Hosseini (82kg), Behrouz Hedayat (87kg), four-time Asian gold medalist Nasser Alizadeh (97kg), and Mohammad Alghousi (130kg) claimed gold medals across the 10 weight classes.

Iran names provisional squad for AFC Futsal Asian Cup



● FFIRI

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Vahid Shamsaei has unveiled the defending champion's provisional 25-man squad for the upcoming AFC Futsal Asian Cup, which kicks off on January 27 in Jakarta, Indonesia. The list will be trimmed to 14 players for the tournament. The Asian powerhouse will begin its quest for a record-extending 14th title against Malaysia in Group D – also featuring Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan – on the second day of the competition. Shamsaei's men will face Saudi Arabia on January 30 before concluding the group stage against Afghanistan two days later at the Jakarta International Velodrome. The top two teams from each of the four groups will advance to the quarterfinals. AFC Futsal Player of the Year

Salar Aqapour will be joined by Moslem Oladqobad and Saeid Ahmadabbasi – the winners of the prestigious award in the past two editions – as well as prolific pivot and captain Hossein Tayyebi in headlining the Iranian squad in Jakarta. The quartet recently led Iran to a gold-medal campaign at the Islamic Solidarity Games in November, capped by a commanding 5-0 victory over Morocco in the final. Iran has long been the dominant force at Asia's flagship futsal event, suffering just four defeats in 105 matches across the previous 17 editions. Two of those losses came in finals against Japan – the only nation other than Iran to have lifted the Asian crown – and Shamsaei's side will again be the outright favorite to lift the trophy at the Indonesia Arena on February 7.

Afghanistan will be among the teams to watch in Jakarta following an impressive 2024 debut, in which Iranian coach Majid Mortezaei's side finished fifth to secure a first-ever World Cup berth in Uzbekistan later that year.

Iran and Afghanistan will meet at a major tournament for the third time in less than two years. Iran claimed a hard-fought 3-1 victory when the sides met at last year's Asian Cup but was held to a 2-2 draw at the Islamic Solidarity Games.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, exited at the group stage in the previous edition but showed signs of progress at the Islamic Solidarity Games on home soil, pushing African champion Morocco in the semifinals before falling 6-3 after extra time.

The following is the Iranian provisional squad for the Asian Cup:

Goalkeepers: Saeid Momeni, Baqer Mohammadi, Mahdi Rostamiha, Behzad Rasouli, Mohammad-Mahdi Esmailpour
Sweepers: Mohammad-Hossein Derakhshani, Amirhossein Gholami, Hossein Sabzi, Sooran Balkaneh, Mahdi Asadshir
Right wingers: Masoud Yousef, Mahdi Karimi, Moslem Oladqobad, Sajjad Yousefkah, Amirhossein Dehqani
Left wingers: Salar Aqapour, Ali Khalilvand, Ali Akrami, Mahdi Mahdikhani, Mohammad-Hossein Bazyar
Pivots: Hossein Tayyebi, Saeid Ahmadabbasi, Amirhossein Abtahi, Behrouz Azimi, Amir-Hamzeh Sadiqzadeh.

ITTF World Team Table Tennis Championships Finals:

Iranian women's quartet confirmed for London visit

Sports Desk

Iran has confirmed its women's squad for the 2026 ITTF World Team Table Tennis Championships Finals, which get underway on April 28 in London, Britain, following the conclusion of the national team trials in Tehran on Thursday. Fatemeh Yari and Setayesh Illokhani reached the final of the trials – featuring the country's top 16 players –

to secure their places at the global showpiece, before Yari emerged victorious in a thrilling showdown to claim the title.

The duo will join Iranian captain Neda Shahsavari and Shima Safaei, who had already booked their spots after an impressive campaign at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh in November.

Shahsavari produced a sensational comeback to defeat Syria's Hend Zaza 4-2

(7-11, 10-12, 11-9, 11-9, 11-8, 13-11) in the final to claim the women's singles gold at the multi-sport event. She also teamed up with Safaei to win the doubles title, courtesy of a 3-1 victory (9-11, 11-6, 11-9, 11-8) over Türkiye's Ece Haraç and Özge Yılmaz. Shahsavari and Safaei were also part of the Iranian trio alongside Illokhani that settled for the women's team bronze medal following an 8-2 semifinal defeat to Türkiye.



⬆️ Setayesh Illokhani (L) and Shima Safaei, pictured at the Islamic Solidarity Games in November, will be part of the Iranian women's quartet at the ITTF World Team Table Tennis Championships Finals.

● ERFAN KHOSHKHOO/ISNA

Iranian mirror-work transforms light, space into universal art

Iranica Desk

A leading researcher in architecture and cultural heritage has commended Iran's successful registration of the art of mirror-work on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List, describing the craft as the product of a coherent, philosophical, and historical system within Iranian architecture. He emphasized that mirror-work is not merely decorative but a conceptual, ontological, and elevated medium through which Iranian thought is expressed via light, space, and meaning.

Seyed Mehdi Mojabi called the registration "a successful and commendable achievement" and explained that Iranian architecture is a systematic, evolved, and comprehensive structure composed of multiple subsystems, among which the concept of light and illumination holds a fundamental place, both materially and symbolically, according to chtn.ir. Highlighting the ancient roots of light in Iranian culture and civilization, Mojabi noted that the concept developed alongside the settlement of Iranian peoples in historical and idealized lands and was manifested in innovative spatial patterns, tangible materials, and structured designs. In Iranian architecture, he explained, thought becomes visible, dynamic, and perceptible.

Mojabi further emphasized the deep connection between Iranian architecture and philosophical, literary, and mystical systems. He explained that Iranian mirror-work combines light, material, and spatial perception to create experiences that transcend functional use, elevating the craft to the level of a sublime



art that challenges human senses and produces a poetic and phenomenological encounter. Addressing the role of mirrors in creating multidimensional spaces, he noted that mirrors break two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional volumes, producing an imaginative spatial experience through light waves. This interaction extends beyond conventional spatial boundaries and transforms spatial perception.

He added that in Iranian mirror-work, a single source of light is multiplied through artistic reflections, creating a fluid, infinite, yet controlled space — a process that unites multiplicity into oneness, exemplifying Iranian mystical thought in tangible form.

Tracing the historical evolution of the art, Mojabi observed that while light and water had previously been used in Iranian



architecture, the development of glass and mirror technology, particularly from the Middle Islamic Period onward, perfected

the practice, culminating in the Safavid era. Mirror-work spread from private residences to palaces and then to ceremonial and

religious spaces, reaching its highest level of refinement. Referring to archaeological evidence, including Seljuk-era

works and findings at the Soltaniyeh Dome, he noted that the remarkable development of glass technology during this period reflected a conscious shift from relying solely on natural light to incorporating human-made illumination in architecture.

Finally, Mojabi highlighted the diversity of regional mirror-work schools in Iran, noting that cultural centers such as Qazvin, Tabriz, Shiraz, and Isfahan each developed distinct styles, reflecting the breadth and depth of the conceptual foundations of this art. He concluded that mirror-work embodies a cosmic space, functions as a universal medium, and represents a unique artistic achievement in the evolution of Iranian architecture — an enduring human and global value that must not be separated from its ontological roots.

iranwaytours.com

Major conservation project underway at Tomb of Xerxes



iribnews.ir

Iranica Desk

Conservation and restoration operations at the Tomb of Xerxes in the Naqsh-e Rostam historical and cultural complex, Fars Province, are currently underway, marking the country's largest rock monument conservation workshop. The project aims to reinforce structural stability, address stone deterioration, and control natural erosion processes.

Led by Mostafa Rakhshandeh-Khu and carried out with the collaboration of a team of Iranian specialists in stone con-

servation, archaeology, geology, architecture, and related fields, the project is being implemented under highly sensitive and specialized conditions. Speaking to ISNA, the head of the Naqsh-e Rostam conservation and restoration team and director of the site said that carrying out operations at a height of more than 60 meters above ground level has required the use of specialized equipment, precise planning, and advanced technical skills. These factors, he noted, have made the workshop one of the most complex rock monument

restoration projects in the country.

Rakhshandeh-Khu added that as part of the initiative, the Tomb of Xerxes was studied and assessed from historical, architectural, technical, and aesthetic perspectives. Areas of the monument that had suffered the most severe damage were subjected to cleaning, stabilization, and principled restoration measures.

He emphasized that these actions are in line with Iran's broader policies for safeguarding historical monuments and ensuring the sustainable protection of cultural heritage. He noted that the continuation of such efforts will play a vital role in preserving the authenticity and longevity of Achaemenid heritage.

The images showing views of the tomb's condition before and after the restoration of various sections reflect the efforts of Iranian experts in one of the most sensitive and challenging stone conservation projects in the country.

Naqsh-e Rostam is home to four rock-cut tombs belonging to four Achaemenid kings: Darius the Great, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II.

Iconic natural sites in Ilam set for national registration

Iranica Desk

The Director General of Ilam Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization announced the preparation of three natural heritage dossiers from Ilam Province for inclusion on Iran's National Heritage List.

Farzad Sharifi stated that three prominent natural sites in Ilam Province are currently undergoing documentation and completion procedures with the aim of being officially registered as national natural monuments. He explained that the selected sites include the sumac trees in Sirvan, the salt springs in the town of Meymak of Mehran, and the Doroughin (False) Spring in Badreh, chtn.ir wrote.

Sharifi emphasized that the preparation of these dossiers is being carried out through expert studies, field documentation, and the compilation of required technical records. The initiative, he said, is intended to protect, preserve, and introduce Ilam's unique natural capacities at the national level. He added that registering natural sites on Iran's National Heritage List plays a vital role in safeguarding natural heritage,



Doroughin Spring
chn.ir

raising public awareness, and promoting sustainable tourism across different regions of the province. According to Sharifi, the process of identifying and registering valuable natural sites is being pursued seriously, and the protection of natural heritage remains one of the main priorities of the department.

Ilam Province, located in western Iran along the Zagros mountain range, is renowned for its rich and diverse natural landscapes. The province is home to dense oak forests,

dramatic mountain chains such as Kabirkuh, and numerous springs, rivers, and waterfalls that create a unique ecological environment.

In addition, Ilam's varied climate and unspoiled landscapes make it a suitable destination for eco-tourism, hiking, and nature-based travel. The ongoing registration of natural sites as national heritage not only contributes to their long-term protection but also helps introduce Ilam Province as a significant natural tourism destination in Iran.



Pezeshkian extends Christmas, New Year greetings to Pope, wishes peace across world

Social Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian observed Christmas on Thursday by issuing an English-language message honoring Jesus Christ as a symbol of mercy, justice and compassion, extending greetings to Christians in Iran and worldwide, according to a post on his official X account in Tehran. In the message, published on December 25 to coincide with Christmas Day in the Christian calendar, Pezeshkian said Jesus Christ is "revered in our tradition as a messenger of compassion, justice, and mercy," and expressed hope that his teachings would continue to inspire dignity and peace among nations, president.ir reported. The statement, addressed to Christians in Iran and abroad, emphasized themes of interfaith respect and coexistence, framing Jesus Christ as a shared moral figure whose message transcends religious boundaries. Pezeshkian described Christ's teachings as timeless and relevant to contempo-



The photo shows Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (R) and Leo XIV, leader of the Catholic Church.
● president.ir

rary global challenges, emphasizing peace and human dignity as universal values. In a separate congratulatory message sent the same day to Pope Leo XIV, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pezeshkian marked both Christmas and the start of the 2026 Gregorian New Year. In that message, he highlighted spiritual virtues attributed to Jesus Christ, including justice, freedom and compassion, which he said are also praised in the Qur'an. Pezeshkian said global challenges require collective wisdom and reflection, calling for independent and responsible action by political leaders and intellectuals to steer the international community away from conflict and toward



peace and stability. He concluded by wishing health to the pope and peace and prosperity to Christian communities worldwide. Later on Thursday evening, Pezeshkian visited the Tehran home of the family of Razmik Khachatorian, a Christian Iranian killed during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, to commemorate Christmas and honor the role of religious minori-

ties in the country's modern history. During the meeting, Pezeshkian paid tribute to Khachatorian's memory and praised the contributions of Iranian Christians to national unity and territorial integrity. He described the participation of Christian citizens in the war as a visible expression of solidarity across ethnic and religious lines.

Ara Shahverdyan, the parliamentary representative of Iran's Christian community, attended the meeting and thanked the president for the visit, reaffirming the community's commitment to public service and national cohesion. Iran officially recognizes Christianity as a minority religion, with Armenian and Assyrian communities maintaining seats in parliament.

Minister: Education, culture, not oil, will drive Iran's future

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's future growth will be driven by education and culture rather than oil revenues, Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri said on Friday, outlining a policy shift that recasts culture, tourism and heritage as engines of sustainable development. Speaking on the sidelines of a ceremony honoring academic Ali Qaemi-Amiri in the northern city of Babol, Salehi-Amiri said Iran's development model must pivot away from hydrocarbons and toward human capital, with schools, universities, families and cultural institutions forming the backbone of long-term growth, IRNA reported. He described oil-dependent development as a structural constraint on Iran's economy and social fabric, arguing that durable progress requires investment in education, values and cultural cohesion. Development, he said, should be rerouted through knowledge networks, elites and community institutions rather than commodity rents. The minister linked social strains and governance challenges to what he called a widening gap between cultural life and the education system, framing culture as a form of social capital that underpins empathy, dignity and collective resilience. Hope, he added, is the key trans-



Iran's Minister of Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Reza Salehi-Amiri speaks in the northern city of Babol, Mazandaran Province on December 26, 2025.
● IRNA

mission mechanism for development, while despair erodes trust and weakens execution capacity. Salehi-Amiri also used the visit to underscore a broader recalibration of governance toward culture-led growth. At a separate meeting with academics at the University of Mazandaran in Babolsar a day earlier, he said heritage, tourism and handicrafts had been pushed to the policy periphery for years despite their high multiplier effects on employment, regional development and cultural diplomacy. Iran has identified about one million historical sites nationwide, more than 43,000 of which are officially registered, including 29 tangible World Heritage sites and 27 elements of intangible heritage, he said. Another 58 completed

dossiers are on UNESCO's tentative list, positioning Iran among the world's major heritage holders. Tourism indicators have also strengthened. Foreign arrivals in the first month of the current Iranian year rose 48.5% year on year, according to the minister, with authorities targeting about 9 million visitors by year-end. He attributed the uptick to stepped-up tourism diplomacy with neighboring states as well as Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf. To crowd in capital, the government has leaned on the private sector to scale infrastructure. Tourism-related facilities financing rose sharply this year, with expanded credit lines earmarked for eco-lodges, handicrafts and destination projects nationwide,

Salehi-Amiri said. He added that provincial authorities now carry greater responsibility for tourism policy after the devolution of 27 ministerial powers to local governments, pushing decision-making closer to governors and municipal executives. On maritime tourism, Salehi-Amiri said Iran is in talks with several Persian Gulf states and with Oman to activate cruise routes in the Sea of Oman, part of a wider strategy to develop coastal tourism linked to the blue economy. The government has retained fuel subsidies covering about 80% of costs for tourist vessels, he said, while backing investors in ports such as Babolsar and Chabahar. The minister acknowledged that infrastructure in Mazandaran province lags visitor flows and warned that unmanaged tourism could exacerbate environmental pressures, migration and cultural frictions. Those concerns, he said, would be raised with the president as part of planning under Iran's Seventh Development Plan (2023-2027), which prioritizes Caspian Sea coastal development. Salehi-Amiri closed by calling on universities to formalize cooperation with the ministry through targeted research projects, arguing that sustained dialogue between academia and the executive branch is essential to translate Iran's cultural wealth into inclusive, durable growth.

Iranian illustrator Babakhan awarded at France's Dracopolis



Arts & Culture Desk

The jury of France's Dracopolis International Illustration Competition awarded its special prize to Iranian illustrator Salimeh Babakhan for her cover design for the book 'Dreams, whether far or near,' the festival organizers said at the Salon Littéraire de l'Imaginaire in the southeastern city of Valence. Babakhan, a Qom-based artist, secured the award after judges assessed submissions for artistic originality, execution quality, thematic alignment and emotional impact. Her illustration stood out for its cohesive visual narrative and inventive treatment of the competition's theme, organizers said. The annual contest forms part of the Dracopolis literary and visual arts festival, staged by the French cultural associ-

ation Dragons Curieux. The event brings together writers, illustrators and visual artists from multiple countries, positioning Valence as a regional hub for speculative literature and fantasy-driven visual culture. This year's competition ran under the theme 'Dreams and Realities,' prompting participants to explore the boundary between the imagined and the tangible through traditional and digital techniques. Babakhan's winning work was created as a book cover, a format that jurors said sharpened the narrative discipline of the piece while preserving expressive range. The illustration's layered composition and controlled color palette reinforced its conceptual clarity, aligning with the festival's emphasis on visual storytelling within speculative genres.

Sri Lanka's Jaffna to host Iran's 'At the End of the Day'

Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian feature film 'At the End of the Day,' directed by Babak Bahrambeigi, will compete at the Jaffna International Cinema Festival in northern Sri Lanka, set to run from December 30, to January 4, 2026, festival organizers said, marking the film's latest step-up on the

South Asian festival circuit. The film, which has yet to screen domestically, tracks a single day in the lives of three couples in a small town as their relationships hit inflection points. Its narrative centers on women forced to weigh social pressure against men's demands for autonomy, pushing the drama through tightly paced,

character-driven turns rather than plot-heavy mechanics, IRNA reported. The cast features prominent Iranian actors Hanieh Tavasoli, Reza Behboudi, Khayyam Vaghar Kashani, Mahtab Servati, Shayesteh Sajadi, Hesam Rezaeian and Shabnam Moghadami. The ensemble approach gives the film breadth while main-

taining a disciplined focus on gendered power dynamics and resilience. 'At the End of the Day' previously picked up a special jury mention at the fourth Kolkata International Film Festival. Jurors cited the film's "forceful portrayal of women's resilience in the face of patriarchy and power," a framing that has

helped it gain traction with programmers scouting for socially grounded cinema. Director Babak Bahrambeigi earlier helmed 'A Long Day,' while producer Mehdi Kouhian is known for backing independent projects, including documentaries 'Death and the Judge' and 'Paris Tehran,' as well as the feature 'Preuve.'

