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When Washington wavers, the Middle East pays the price

 By Kamran Yeganegi
Foreign policy expert

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

At a time when the United States remains one of the most influential actors in global politics, growing signs of dysfunction in Washington's decision-making process are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. The roots of this disruption lie not in external shocks, but in deep and persistent divisions within US domestic politics. Reports and analysis in outlets such as the Washington Post paint a consistent picture of political polarization, institutional fatigue, and the erosion of consensus in the American system of governance. The consequences of this instability do not stop at US borders. The Middle East is among the first regions to feel its impact.

In international politics, the internal dynamics of major powers invariably shape their external behavior. As political fragmentation intensifies in the United States and policy coordination becomes more difficult, American foreign policy tends to grow more reactive, less predictable, and increasingly driven by short-term domestic considerations. For the Middle East—a region long accustomed to the strategic weight of US decisions—this volatility translates into heightened uncertainty and shrinking space for long-term planning.

Washington's growing preoccupation with internal crises, from electoral rivalries to institutional deadlock, has gradually pushed foreign policy into the background or, worse, turned it into a tool for domestic political consumption.

Iran revamps forex policy to address livelihood woes

Pezeshkian says new policy to maintain support, not to cut subsidies

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President Masoud Pezeshkian (c) chairs a meeting with his cabinet members also attended by Iran's security chief Ali Larijani (2nd L) "to ensure food security" in Tehran on January 4, 2026.

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Media warfare; from information to influence

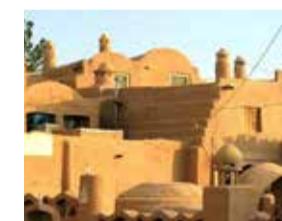
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Global outcry over US abduction of Venezuelan president

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People hold protest in front of the US consulate against the US attack on Venezuela in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on January 4, 2026.

● AFP

International Desk

The United States came under fire for breaking international law after it launched airstrikes on the Venezuelan capital and kidnapped its president, Nicolas Maduro, and his wife – a move that has also sparked protests in many countries.

Venezuela's president was in a New York jail on Sunday after the shock US snatch-and-grab raid on Saturday to remove him from power.

Maduro and his wife are facing drug-trafficking and weapons charges in the US.

Handcuffed and in sandals, Maduro was escorted by federal agents through a Manhattan US Drug Enforcement Administration facility, a video posted by the White House on social media showed.

"Good night, Happy New Year," the 63-year-old leader was heard saying in English.

The US move to kidnap Maduro came amid six months of escalating tensions between Washington and the South American country following the US military buildup near Venezuela on the pretext of cracking down on drug cartels.

Anti-US protests

Major cities across the world have been the scene of protests against the US kidnapping of the Venezuelan president. Protesters took to the streets in Argentina, Chile, India, Pakistan, the UK, Spain, Italy and many US cities to denounce Washington's move and demand the release of Maduro.

Many countries also called the US strike a violation of international law and called for immediate release of the Venezuelan president.

"China calls on the US to ensure the personal safety of President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, release them at once, stop toppling the government of Venezuela," the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement, calling the strike a "clear violation of international law." Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim urged the release of Venezuelan president and his wife "without any undue delay."

"I have followed developments in Venezuela with grave concern. The leader of Venezuela and his wife were seized in a United States military operation of unusual scope and nature," Anwar said on US social media company X.

He stressed that such actions "constitute a clear violation of international law and amount to an unlawful use of force against a sovereign state."

North Korea also censured the US move as a "serious encroachment of sovereignty," state media said.

Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry "strongly denounces the US hegemony-seeking act committed in Venezuela," said a ministry spokesperson in a statement carried by the official KCNA.

"The incident is another example that clearly confirms once again the rogue and brutal nature of the US," they added. Singapore is "gravely concerned by the US intervention" in Venezuela, the country's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

France, Spain, Brazil, Iran, Russia and

the European Commission were also among those who said US President Donald Trump had broken international rules.

There were also calls for the UN security council to urgently convene to discuss the matter.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in a phone conversation with his Venezuelan counterpart Yvan Gil Pinto described the move as a "clear instance of state terrorism" and a blatant violation of the Venezuelan people's sovereignty. The former denounced the abduction of Venezuela's legitimate president and his spouse in the strongest terms, saying the action constituted an open assault on Venezuela's national will.

He reaffirmed Iran's support for the Venezuelan people and their elected government.

Dangerous precedent'

The UN secretary general, Antonio Guterres, said the action by the US sets a "dangerous precedent," a spokesperson said.

"The secretary general continues to emphasize the importance of full respect – by all – of international law, including the UN charter. He's deeply concerned that the rules of international law have not been respected," UN spokesperson Stephan Dujarric said.

Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, said that the US actions "crossed an unacceptable line," comparing them to "the darkest moments of [us] interference in Latin America and the Caribbean" – an apparent reference to the dozens of US military interventions in the region over the past two centuries.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot posted on social media, "The military operation that led to the capture of Nicolas Maduro violates the principle of not resorting to force that underpins international law. France reiterates that no lasting political solution can be imposed from the outside and that only sovereign people themselves can decide their future."

Spain's Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez said, "Spain did not recognize the Maduro regime. But neither will it recognize an intervention that violates international law and pushes the region toward a horizon of uncertainty and belligerence."

Miguel Díaz-Canel, the Cuban president, described the attacks as "state terrorism against the Venezuelan people."

Veep says gov't acknowledges 'right to criticism' over shortcomings



Mohammad Reza Aref
● IRNA

National Desk

Iran's Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref said on Sunday that the government is open to criticism but some people are looking to take advantage of the situation to turn the protests over economic woes violent.

Addressing a meeting with some cabinet members, Aref said the government acknowledges that the country is faced with shortcomings.

"The government recognizes the right to criticism and protest, and this is [within] the capacity of our [1979] Revolution," he said, stressing that the government expects the Iranian youth "not to fall into the trap of the enemies." Since December 28, several Iranian cities have been the scene of protests against economic problems, which began at Tehran's Grand Bazaar over the

national currency devaluation. Several people have been reportedly killed during the protests.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Saturday reacted to the ongoing demonstrations, stressing that "protest is legitimate, but protest is different from rioting."

Officials must engage with protesters, he added, because "talking to the protester is different from talking to the rioter; talking to the rioter is of no use, and the rioter must be put in his place." Ayatollah Khamenei underlined that it is "absolutely unacceptable" for groups to come "under various titles and names with the intention of sabotage and creating insecurity," standing behind "faithful, healthy and revolutionary bazaaris," exploiting their protests and engaging in unrest.

Recently launched Iranian satellites successfully enter in-orbit testing stage



● AFP

The three indigenous Iranian remote-sensing satellites of Paya, Kowsar, and Zafar-2 have successfully completed multiple in-orbit testing phases in the first week following their launch, marking a major national achievement in the country's space and communications sector.

Throughout the orbital tests, all three satellites progressed into the subsystem performance evaluation phase, and their overall conditions were reported as favorable, Press TV reported.

As a result of a problem that arose during the orbital injection of the Paya satellite

by the launch vehicle, significant focus was placed on stabilizing the satellite, and required corrective actions were executed with great accuracy.

The three satellites have successfully finished testing their power supplies and distribution, thermal management, telemetry and telecommand communications, positioning, stabilization, attitude control, and pointing subsystems.

On December 28, 2025, the three Iranian satellites of Zafar-2, Paya (Tolou-3), and Kowsar were launched into space aboard Russia's powerful Soyuz launch vehicle and were successfully placed into orbit.

US Democrats rip Trump administration for 'illegal' strikes on Venezuela



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro is escorted by administrator of personnel of the US Drug Enforcement Administration after arriving at Stewart Air National Guard Base in Newburgh, New York, on January 3, 2026.

● ABC News

— pointing to remarks the officials made during briefings late last year.

"Secretaries Rubio and Hegseth looked every Senator in the eye a few weeks ago and said this wasn't about regime change. I didn't trust them then and we see now that they blatantly lied to Congress," Kim wrote on social platform X.

"This strike doesn't represent strength. It's not sound foreign policy," he continued. "It puts Americans at risk in Venezuela and the region, and it sends a horrible and disturbing signal to other powerful leaders across the globe that targeting a head of state is an acceptable policy for the US government."

Senator Ruben Gallego echoed him, calling it the "second unjustified war in my life time."

Jim McGovern also questioned the military operation, saying, "Without authorization from Congress, and with the vast majority of Americans opposed to military action, Trump just launched an unjustified, illegal strike on Venezuela," he wrote on X. "He says we don't have enough money for healthcare for Americans — but somehow we have unlimited funds for war???"

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez argued that the move was more about oil and regime change than drugs.

"They need a trial now to pretend that it isn't. Especially to distract from Epstein (scandal) + skyrocketing healthcare costs," the New York Democrat added.

Democrats have railed for months against the Trump administration's moves in the Caribbean, including mounting pressure on Venezuela and strikes against alleged drug trafficking boats.

International Desk

The US Democratic lawmakers lambasted the administration after the country's President Donald Trump announced the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores and carried out a "large scale" strike in the country.

The move, many argued, was "illegal" without congressional approval.

Senator Andy Kim specifically called out Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth over the operation

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

CARTOON



● RAJABI

Iran revamps forex policy to address livelihood woes

Pezeshkian says new policy to maintain support, not to cut subsidies

Economy Desk

The Iranian government's Information Council said in a statement on Sunday that the administration will henceforth supply foreign currency to basic goods and production inputs through a secondary market platform, known as the Second Hall, operated via the Central Bank (CBI).

Under the plan, which will be implemented within the framework of next year's budget law starting on March 21, 2026, foreign currency for basic goods and inputs will be prioritized through the so-called market platform and the Central Bank's dedicated gateway.

"From now on, foreign currency for inputs and basic goods will be supplied from the Second Hall and through the Central Bank's dedicated portal, with priority given to currency supply," said the statement carried by Mehr News Agency.

The core of the policy is a shift from allocating foreign currency at the beginning of the supply chain to transferring subsidies to the end of the chain and final consumers. The government said the redesign aims to eliminate rent-seeking caused by multiple exchange rates, reduce uncertainty for economic actors and create lasting stability in the market.

Despite significant foreign currency resources being allocated in recent years, the statement said problems such as volatility in allocations, failure to achieve target prices and the exposure of inputs to the free market have persisted, underscoring the need for structural reform and for removing price dependence on unstable currency mechanisms.

Under the new mechanism, in addition to

streamlining currency supply channels, some institutions and companies will be allowed to use their own foreign currency resources directly to import basic goods without standing in long queues.

The government said implementation of the policy began on December 22 and that any potential price changes will be gradual, managed and closely supervised to prevent sudden market shocks and to ensure the benefits of reform are fully passed on to the public.

Separately, the presidency's website said that amid continued economic pressures and with the aim of ensuring food security, improving livelihoods and increasing stability and predictability in the economy, a comprehensive government support plan comprising 15 articles has formally entered the implementation phase.

The plan's executive bylaw was finalized on Sunday in a high-level online meeting attended by President Masoud Pezeshkian, the first vice president, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, ministers and economic cabinet members, representatives of relevant executive bodies and provincial governors nationwide, after which its implementation was officially launched.

In the first phase, and on an interim basis, the plan will allocate 10 million rials per month (approximately \$7) in purchasing credit per person for 80 million Iranian citizens for a period of four months.

Addressing the meeting, Pezeshkian said the government has prioritized protecting people's livelihoods and providing effective support for producers, shopkeepers and guilds.

"Accordingly, the demands, concerns



President Masoud Pezeshkian (r), and the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani (c) attend a high-level online meeting in Tehran on January 4, 2026.

president.ir

and issues of actors across the production-to-consumption chain will be examined carefully and pursued and resolved through regular provincial meetings with governors, county officials and process owners, and the plan's implementation must be monitored and reported on a daily basis," he said.

"The government's policy in this plan is not to remove or reduce subsidies, but to transfer subsidies from the beginning of the chain to the final consumer, so that any potential price increases are fully compensated and households' purchasing power is preserved," Pezeshkian said.

"Under no circumstances should the prices of other goods and services increase, and oversight in this regard will be applied seriously, decisively and on the ground," he added.

The plan, with a focus on stabilizing markets, strengthening production, boosting purchasing power and closely supervising the supply chain, has been placed high on the government's economic agenda for the coming months.

Meanwhile, the minister of cooperatives, labor and social welfare said on Saturday that the government would also continue paying cash handouts to more than 70 million people, who currently receive an average of 4 million rials (approximately \$2.90) per month.

He added that the government had originally planned to launch the expanded food coupon program in October, noting that individuals will receive a total credit of 40 million rials (approximately \$29) for their January allocation to compensate for the four-month delay.

Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce:

JETRO's revival offers 'realistic bridge' for Tehran-Tokyo trade ties

Economy Desk

Even under unilateral sanctions, Iran and Japan can strengthen the infrastructure for future cooperation, said Bahram Shakouri, vice chairman of the Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce, two weeks after the signing of a cooperation agreement between the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) in Tehran.

"The reopening of JETRO in Iran should not be seen merely as an administrative or symbolic step," Shakouri told Tasnim News Agency. "JETRO's reactivation can create a realistic bridge between Iranian and Japanese businesses."

On December 22, the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and JETRO signed a memorandum of understanding during a high-level meeting in Tehran, where Japanese Ambassador Tamaki Tsukada announced the revival of the economic section of his embassy.

The agreement commits both sides to sustained collaboration in non-sanctioned and emerging sectors, with a focus on maintaining the presence of Japanese firms in Iran, strengthening economic di-

plomacy, and building institutional frameworks for future expansion of trade relations. It includes plans for reciprocal trade delegations, joint training programs, and business matchmaking events.

The vice chairman of the Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce told Tasnim that even under ongoing US sanctions, the two countries can strengthen the infrastructure for future cooperation. He noted that Iran's economy remains under pressure from unilateral sanctions, financial constraints, and reduced diversification of trade partners, while Japan — despite its cautious stance — has maintained a long-term perspective in international engagement. JETRO plays a key role in guiding and supporting Japanese companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises that are less dependent on the US market and more flexible in entering markets like Iran.

He emphasized that current trade volumes fall far short of the two countries' real potential. "Even if JETRO's revival does not immediately produce numerical leaps, it can upgrade the quality of trade relations — from intermediary-based to institutional and sustainable."

Areas of cooperation

Shakouri highlighted overlooked opportunities in industry, mining, machinery, agriculture, tourism, and healthcare. "Japan's cooperation model is based on value-chain integration," he said. "Iran can supply raw materials, agricultural and food products, while Japan contributes technology, machinery, and technical know-how."

Beyond traditional sectors, tourism and health offer "significant yet neglected potential" to complement economic ties.

In mining, he pointed to opportunities for boosting productivity and efficiency through advanced technologies, including hydrogen-powered engines and hydrogen fuel systems for machinery — areas where Japan holds valuable experience. "This can pave the way for green production and carbon reduction," he said.

Regarding industrial and mining machinery, he noted that reputable Japanese brands possess strong capacity to assist in equipment rehabilitation, modernization, technology transfer, and workforce training. "This cooperation need not mean direct imports and can be pursued through low-risk channels," Shakouri explained. Iran currently operates more than 15,000

mining machines, the majority from Komatsu, he added. "With Japanese cooperation, this equipment can be overhauled and upgraded."

Shadow of unilateral sanctions

The vice chairman of the joint chamber acknowledged that unilateral sanctions will continue to limit the scope of cooperation. "However, activating institutional, academic, and technical infrastructure can prepare the ground for faster relationship growth in the future."

When asked whether Japan could assume a special role among Iran's potential trade partners — given Iran's current reliance almost exclusively on China — Shakouri responded, "Japan can serve as a complementary, high-quality, technology-oriented partner alongside Iran's other trading allies, and JETRO's reactivation can be a cornerstone of this path."

He stressed the century-long history of Iran-Japan commercial ties and Japan's technological parity with advanced Western nations. "Japan has strong potential to meet part of Iran's technological and industrial needs and could serve as a substitute for current partners in certain sectors," he said.

When Washington wavers ...

In such an environment, the Middle East is rarely approached through a coherent, forward-looking strategy. Instead, it is often addressed through ad hoc responses, symbolic shows of resolve, or policy shifts designed primarily to resonate with domestic audiences. The result is a pattern of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory policies, ill-suited to managing the region's complex and interconnected crises.

The costs of this approach are tangible. Fluctuations in security commitments, abrupt changes in priorities, and repeated recalibrations of engagement

or withdrawal all contribute to an atmosphere of strategic ambiguity. Even in the absence of a major regional crisis, this chronic uncertainty can raise security costs, intensify rivalries, and undermine diplomatic initiatives. For regional actors, the challenge is not merely responding to specific US policies, but navigating an environment in which those policies themselves are subject to sudden and unpredictable change.

What makes this situation particularly consequential is that the warning signs are increasingly visible within American media discourse itself. Coverage in

newspapers like the Washington Post does more than report daily political developments; it reflects a deeper concern about the weakening link between domestic governance and coherent foreign policy. When decision-making in Washington becomes gridlocked or fragmented, foreign policy coherence is often the first casualty — and regions such as the Middle East bear the consequences.

From a regional perspective, the message is unmistakable. Excessive reliance on a global actor struggling with internal political turbulence carries significant risks. As US domestic instability

deepens, the likelihood that American foreign policy will oscillate between engagement and retrenchment increases. This reality is pushing Middle Eastern actors to reconsider long-standing assumptions, diversify their external partnerships, and place greater emphasis on regional agency and locally grounded security arrangements.

This shift does not necessarily signal the retreat of the United States from the Middle East, but rather a transformation in how its role is perceived and managed. A United States constrained by domestic divisions is less capable of sustaining consistent commitments

abroad. In response, regional actors are increasingly compelled to hedge against uncertainty, adapt to policy swings, and seek greater strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, instability in Washington is no longer a distant or abstract variable for the Middle East. It is a structural factor shaping the region's security calculations, diplomatic choices, and long-term outlook. In a Middle East where uncertainty has become the norm, tremors in the heart of American decision-making are not just foreign news — they are part of the region's everyday strategic equation.

Iran's steel output up 9.2% y/y to 3.4 million mt in November



IRNA

Iran ramped up its steel output in November to maintain its position as a leading global steel producer despite foreign sanctions that have affected the country's energy supply and distribution systems.

Figures from the World Steel Association (Worldsteel), cited in a Saturday report by IRIB News, showed that Iranian steel mills produced about 3.4 million metric tons (mt) of steel in November, up 9.2% from the same month last year. The output allowed Iran to retain its position as the world's tenth-largest steel producer in November and register one of the highest monthly growth rates in steel production globally, the figures showed, Press TV reported.

The data indicated that among the world's 10 leading steel producers, only India, the United States, Brazil, and Iran reported growth in production in November, while top producer China recorded a second consecutive monthly decline, with output falling by 10.9%. Total steel output by the 70 producing countries surveyed by Worldsteel fell by 4.6% year-on-year to 140.1 million mt in November and declined by 2% to more than 1.622 billion mt in the first 11 months of the year.

Iran's steel production over the 11-month period reached 28.8 million mt, up 0.1% compared with the same period a year earlier, the figures showed.

The data also showed that Iran accounted for around 62% of total steel production in the West Asia region, which includes producers such as Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

Iran has maintained its position as a major steel producer this year despite facing acute energy supply constraints and rising costs, which many analysts attribute to foreign sanctions as well as broader global supply-and-demand challenges.

Steel mills in the country reported natural gas supply disruptions during colder months and electricity shortages during the summer, when higher household demand prompted authorities to impose restrictions on industrial energy consumption.

Media warfare; from information to influence



By Asgar Ghahremanpour
Editor-in-chief

INTERVIEW

In today's interconnected world, war is no longer fought only on conventional battlefields. It has expanded into the media space, where narratives, images, and perceptions shape public opinion and political outcomes. Media warfare increasingly relies on news framing, digital platforms, and social networks, blurring the line between information and propaganda.

The following exclusive interview, conducted with Annunthra Rangan, senior research officer at the Chennai Centre for China Studies, explores this evolving landscape and examines how control over narratives has become a key source of power in contemporary global politics.

IRAN DAILY: From a theoretical perspective in international relations, how should media warfare be best conceptualized today: as soft power, cognitive warfare, influence operations, or an extension of hybrid warfare?

RANGAN: In international relations (IR), theories are not neutral or universal truths; they are products of specific historical moments and power structures. They are developed by individuals and states to explain and often justify their own interests. In that sense, media warfare cannot be explained through a single IR theory. It is a strategic phenomenon that cuts across realism, constructivism, and critical theories simultaneously.

At its core, media warfare is warfare by itself. It is an extension of power projection, not an auxiliary activity. Media functions as a major sophisticated tool of soft power, enabling states to achieve political and strategic objectives without any direct defence-related confrontation. This is where propaganda and influence operations become central. Influence operations are not subtle or accidental; they are deliberate efforts to shape perception, control narratives, and manufacture consent at both domestic and international levels, like how China does.



than a complete representation of reality. Algorithms do not distinguish between information and propaganda. They reward core engagement. This means emotionally charged narratives, moral framing, and polarising content are systematically amplified, while nuanced or inconvenient perspectives are deprioritised. As a result, the line between informing the public and manipulating perception has become increasingly blurred.

Social media platforms further collapse these distinctions by placing state narratives, media reporting, influencer commentary, and public opinion within the same ecosystem. In modern conflicts, influence is not exercised through isolated campaigns but through sustained narrative environments. A single news story can simultaneously inform, persuade, and psychologically condition audiences. This is clearly visible in conflicts such as Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, or narratives surrounding Iran, Russia, and other non-aligned countries — if I could put it that way — where reporting and strategic messaging operate in parallel and reinforce one another.

While the terminology of information, propaganda, and psychological operations still exists for analytical clarity, the reality is that contemporary media warfare operates on a fused model. These elements now function together to shape not just short-term opinion, but long-term perceptions of legitimacy, threat, and morality.

Today, social media often influences public opinion more than traditional news itself. Influencers shape perceptions more powerfully than institutions, and consumption patterns are determined by algorithmic design rather than informed choice. Platforms like Meta effectively decide what gains visibility and what does not. Content that challenges dominant Western or pro-Israel narratives often faces "shadow-banning". This is not an anomaly. It is how modern media power operates.

Do you believe the traditional distinction between information, propaganda, and psychological operations still holds in contemporary conflicts?

In today's media environment, the traditional distinctions between information, propaganda, and psychological operations no longer function as separate categories.

In practice, they form a single influence continuum. Often, it is not the content itself but the interpretation and framing of that content that has the greatest impact.

What is presented as news today is rarely neutral; it is shaped by perspectives, interests,

and strategic intent rather than objective reporting.

As I mentioned earlier, contemporary news is frequently a culmination of selective viewpoints rather

than a complete representation of reality. Algorithms do not distinguish between information and propaganda. They reward core engagement. This means emotionally charged narratives, moral framing, and polarising content are systematically amplified, while nuanced or inconvenient perspectives are deprioritised. As a result, the line between informing the public and manipulating perception has become increasingly blurred.

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Which classic media theories — such as agenda-setting, framing, or "manufacturing consent" — remain most useful for analyzing modern media warfare, and which have lost explanatory power?

“

In today's media environment, the traditional distinctions between information, propaganda, and psychological operations no longer function as separate categories. In practice, they form a single influence continuum. Often, it is not the content itself but the interpretation and framing of that content that has the greatest impact. What is presented as news today is rarely neutral; it is shaped by perspectives, interests, and strategic intent rather than objective reporting.



14-year-old Ahmad Salaymeh, a Palestinian teenager who was released on November 28, 2023, as part of a captives-prisoners swap deal between Hamas and Israel, and his father Nawaf Salaymeh talk through social media after Ahmad was prevented from returning to school, in the occupied al-Quds (Jerusalem), on December 7, 2023.

AMMAR AWAD/REUTERS

Globally, the dominant narrative continues to be the Western narrative. This dominance is structural and has been entrenched since World War II. Western media does not merely report events; it has its own definition of legitimacy, morality, and acceptable opinion and backs it up with its reporting. By repeatedly projecting its perspective as the "international consensus," it marginalises alternative voices and normalises a pro-Western worldview as objective truth. Modern media warfare operates on multiple interconnected levels. Cognitive warfare targets how people think, feel, and interpret reality. Information warfare determines what information is released, what is suppressed, and how events are framed. The current narratives surrounding Iran and Palestine clearly demonstrate this selective framing, where certain actions are amplified while others are systematically ignored or justified by Israel and the US. Hybrid warfare is the deliberate fusion of media, diplomacy, economic pressure, technology, and digital platforms into one offen-

interests and narratives, and sustain propaganda news rather than present balanced realities. Media warfare is mainly about power, control, and the strategic manipulation of truth.

To what extent is modern media warfare still state-driven, and how much has it become a networked process involving private media, platforms, and non-state actors?

The state remains the architect of media warfare. Targets, threat perceptions, and the overall nature of media conflict are not accidental — they are designed and guided by state doctrines, national security strategies, and foreign policy objectives. Media houses and propaganda ecosystems do not operate in isolation; they function within a framework created and sustained by the state to project legitimacy and shape global perception.

If we take the United States as an example, major media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Bloomberg act as narrative setters. Their fram-

ing often becomes the reference point that other countries' media later adopt, sometimes with minimal variation.

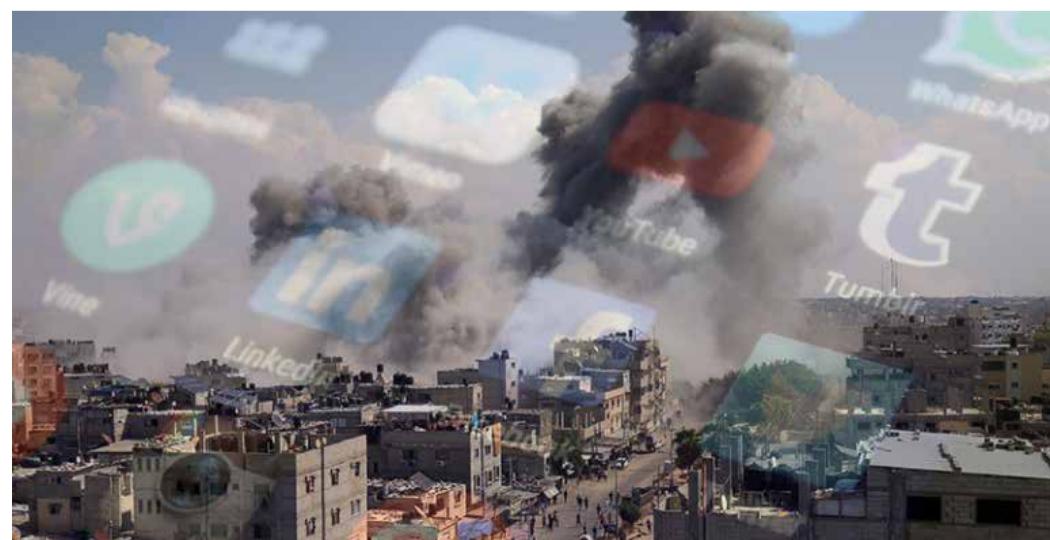
This has historically been the case. Every country has its own primary narrative drivers. India looks to The Hindu, The Times of India, and Deccan Herald; Iran relies on Iran Daily and Tehran Times. The difference lies not in the existence of national media, but in how strategically and systematically these narratives are deployed.

What we are witnessing today is a carefully curated information network where narratives flow in a predictable pattern: from official statements to major media outlets and then into international reporting. While wordplay may differ, the core framing often remains aligned with the original state position. This is where influence operations become central to media warfare.

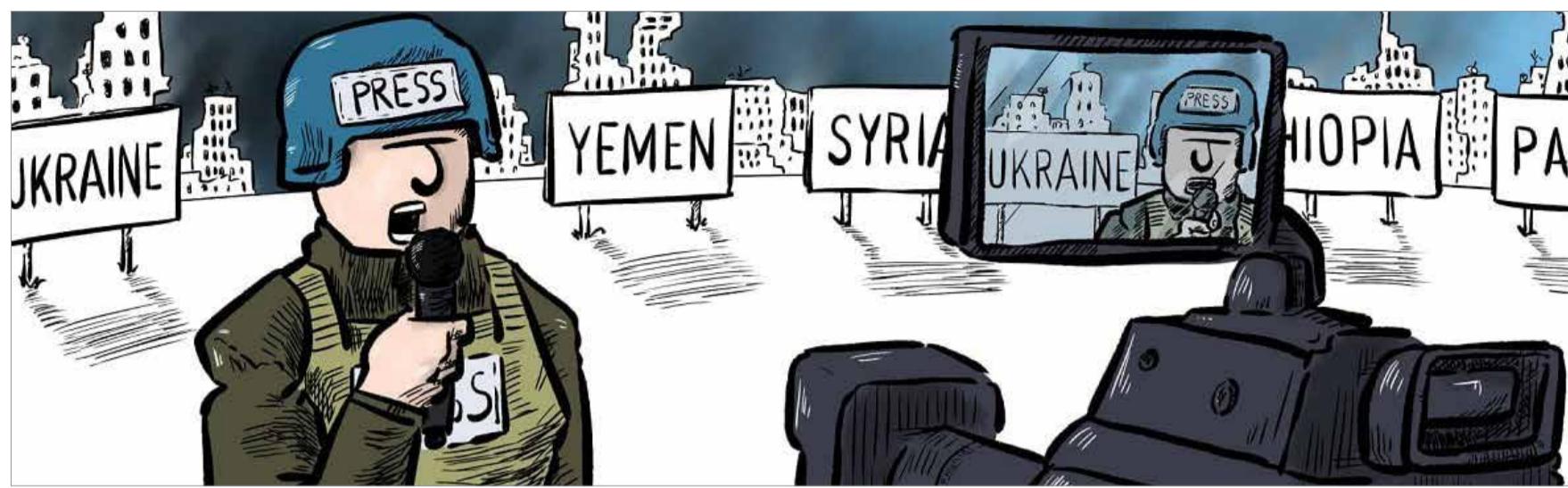
China offers a textbook case of influence operations. Through instruments such as Confucius Institutes, Beijing has embedded soft power messaging within major South and Southeast Asian countries. Its "50-Cent Army," comprising thousands of online operators, actively amplifies pro-China narratives while discrediting adversaries. During periods of heightened tension, including recent India-Pakistan escalations, coordinated digital campaigns were deployed to promote narratives favourable to Pakistan and hostile to India. These are not spontaneous public reactions; they are structured influence efforts.

Similarly, the United States' media strategy toward Iran over the past four decades and Palestine in recent years demonstrates how sustained narrative framing can shape global opinion. Through aligned media coverage, think tanks, and policy research institutions, certain perspectives are amplified while others are systematically marginalised. As a result, alternative viewpoints struggle to gain legitimacy, regardless of evidence or context.

That said, the operational space of media warfare has expanded beyond direct state control. Private media corporations, social media platforms, public relations firms, think tanks, and even individual influencers now act as force multipliers. While these actors may not be formally coor-



ARAB CENTER WASHINGTON DC



RESET DIALOGUES

Classic media theories remain relevant today, but their application has evolved. Modern media is less about neutral reporting and more about aligning with the strategic interests of powerful actors (non-governmental actors, to be precise) and shaping narratives that serve those interests. In this sense, states leverage the media to project power and advance their objectives — a very realistic use of information as a tool of influence. Among classic theories, the Hypodermic Needle model is particularly evident today. Media messages are “injected” directly into audiences, who often accept them uncritically. Modern media doesn’t just inform people, it guides them to adopt the narrative it dictates.

Framing and agenda-setting remain important as well. Media not only selects which topics to cover but also determines how they are interpreted, highlighting certain aspects while omitting others. This structural bias is especially visible in capitalist media systems, where ownership, advertising, sourcing, and ideology influence what reaches the public. For example, how often do we see reporting on corporate misdeeds in India, like issues around Adani, versus how extensively China’s Covid response is covered in its own media? Or how much coverage does the Epstein case currently receive in the US? These are a few examples that illustrate that media narratives are curated to serve elite interests and shape public perception, precisely what classic media theories like agenda-setting, framing, and manufacturing consent sought to explain, but now in a more sophisticated, strategic, and networked form, like you mentioned.

In your view, has media warfare shifted from persuasion toward strategies of cognitive overload, confusion, and emotional exhaustion?

Media warfare today has moved far beyond online consumption; it is actively shaping how people think, perceive, and process reality. The volume and repetition of digital content have reached a point where information doesn’t just inform, it settles into the mind. People are rarely given the space to pause, reflect, or engage in original thinking because the flow of content is constant and overwhelming. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to the same biased viewpoints, those perspectives begin to feel like the objective truth. Over time, the brain starts aligning itself with that bias, not necessarily because the information is accurate, but because it is familiar and frequently reinforced. This is no longer just about belief formation. What we are seeing instead is a form of paralysis, polarization, and emotional capture. Media narratives increasingly mix facts, half-truths, and outright fabrica-

tions, while accelerating news cycles ensure that stories disappear before they can be properly verified or challenged. The result is confusion and emotional fatigue rather than clarity, making audiences less capable of critical engagement and more vulnerable to manipulation.

How do Western mainstream media employ framing techniques in their coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict to shape perceptions of legitimacy and self-defense?

It is widely evident that Western mainstream media coverage of Israel’s actions in Gaza is deeply biased. From the very beginning of the war, Israeli military operations have consistently been portrayed as acts of self-defense. Even when examined closely, these actions are framed as legitimate rights rather than acknowledged as potential crimes under international law. Western media narratives overwhelmingly support the offenders, including Benjamin Netanyahu, and tend to align themselves with Tel Aviv. Over time, a powerful and simplified perception has been constructed in which Israel is repeatedly presented as the victim, while the actual victims often go unnoticed. This bias is clearly reflected in the language used in news reporting and opinion pieces. Israeli actions are described as Israel “defending” itself, whereas Palestinian efforts to resist or protect themselves are framed as Gaza “attacking” Israel. Such linguistic choices subtly but effectively shape public perception of legitimacy and morality.

Another important factor is contextual omission. Much of the coverage begins at moments of escalation, such as rocket fire or sudden attacks, without adequately addressing the broader structural realities of occupation, blockade, and long-standing power asymmetries. By stripping events of their historical and political context, violence is portrayed as sudden or irrational rather than as part of a prolonged and deeply rooted conflict.

Visual framing further reinforces this imbalance. Israeli casualties are often individualized and humanized, shown as innocent civilian deaths with personal stories and faces. In contrast, Palestinian deaths are frequently presented in large numbers and anonymous images, reducing human suffering to statistics. This repeated pattern conditions audiences to emotionally side with Israel, while Palestinian loss is normalized and treated as routine news rather than a humanitarian tragedy.

Would you consider Israel one of the most effective actors in aligning its media narrative with broader Western foreign policy discourse? If so, how is this alignment sustained?

Yes, Israel is one of the most experienced actors in aligning its media narrative with Western foreign policy discourse, and it has done so in a highly methodical way. Its close and long-standing alliance with the United States has allowed Israel to mirror Washington’s strategic language so closely that, over time, their narrative styles have become almost indistinguishable. Tel Aviv consistently frames its actions using concepts that already resonate within Western policy thinking, such as counterterrorism, self-defense, democracy under threat, and shared civilizational values. Because these frameworks are familiar, Israeli messaging appears legitimate and normalized rather than exceptional, aligning seamlessly with how Western states justify their own military actions.

This is reiterated through strong institutional ties with Western governments, think tanks, media outlets, and policy elites. Israeli officials and military spokespersons are often the first and most accessible sources during moments of escalation, allowing them to shape the initial narrative, which is crucial because first frames tend to endure even when later evidence challenges them. Tel Aviv has also invested heavily in professional public diplomacy and coordinated digital communication strategies that are fast, disciplined, and tailored specifically for Western audiences. In contrast, Palestinian narratives remain fragmented, under-resourced, and structurally marginalized. Ultimately, this alignment is sustained by power asymmetries. Western media systems privilege state actors, security frameworks, and strategic allies, making Israeli perspectives more readily accepted as authoritative, while Palestinian voices are frequently treated as secondary or emotional rather than political.

How can the asymmetry in media representation of Palestinian civilian casualties be explained from an institutional or political economy of media perspective?

Mainstream media organizations tend to operate within power centers that privilege state actors, official sources, and geopolitical allies. Since Israel is closely aligned with Western governments, its narratives and civilian losses receive greater institutional legitimacy and visibility. From a sourcing perspective, Western media rely heavily on Israeli cabinet officials, military spokespersons, and Western diplomatic sources, all of whom are seen as credible and authoritative. Palestinian civilians, on the other hand, lack comparable institutional access and are often mediated through numbers, humanitarian agencies, or brief mentions rather than direct voices. This creates a hierarchy of whose suffering is consid-

ered narratively important. There is also an economic dimension. Media outlets are influenced by advertisers, political pressures, and audience sensitivities within Western markets. Humanizing Israeli civilians aligns more comfortably with dominant political narratives and avoids backlash, whereas sustained, empathetic coverage of Palestinian suffering risks being framed as controversial or politically risky. Additionally, newsroom routines and time pressures favor simplified, security-focused frames. At the end of the day, the world will side with the one that helps you generate money and not the real sufferings.

Has the rise of social media genuinely weakened Western narrative dominance on the Israel-Gaza war, or has it merely shifted the battlefield? How significant is the role of platform algorithms in shaping visibility and suppression of narratives, and can we speak of a form of “geopolitical algorithmic bias”?

No, in my view, the Western narrative has not weakened. Based on personal observation, there is significantly less information about Gaza circulating on social media today, and public engagement has sharply declined. Very few accounts or pages now consistently report on Gaza, and even during the peak of the war, coverage from the Palestinian perspective was far more limited compared to the Israeli side. This imbalance was not organic. During the height of the conflict, a large number of social media accounts aligned with Western and Israeli narratives emerged and actively shaped the information environment. At the same time, platforms played a decisive role in containing Gaza-related content. Meta, in particular, restricted or suppressed accounts that reported on Gaza. Even when accounts were not outright blocked, their reach was systematically reduced. Certain keywords, such as “Gaza,” “Palestine,” “genocide,” and “war,” were effectively penalized. Posts using these terms saw a sharp decline in visibility, and in many cases, entire accounts experienced reach suppression.



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SCMP



Iranian striker Mahdi Taremi (c) is surrounded by his Olympiacos teammates after scoring in a 3-0 victory over OFI in the Greek Super Cup game at the Pankritio Stadium, Heraklion, Greece, on January 3, 2025.

olympiacos.org

Persepolis agrees deal to sign Uzbek striker Sergeev

Sports Desk

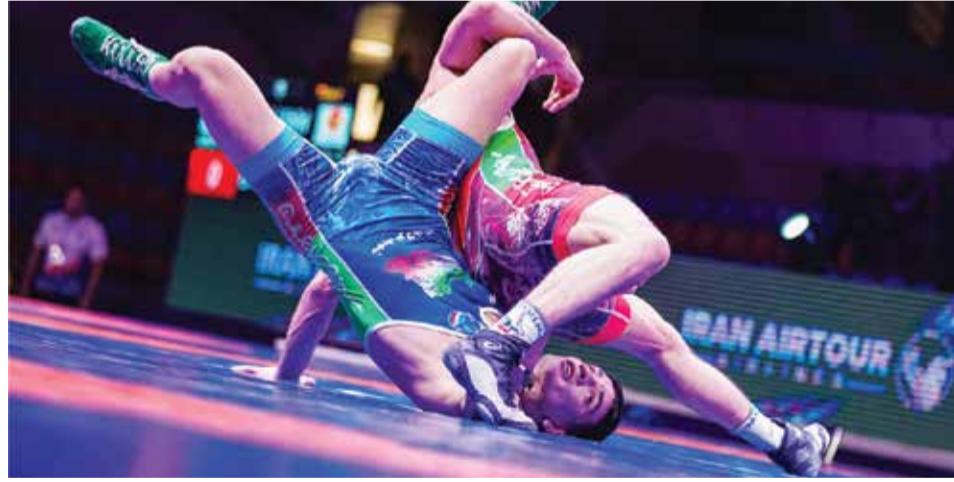
Persepolis has reached an agreement with Igor Sergeev to sign the Uzbekistan international striker from Pakhtakor, the Persian Gulf Pro League club announced on Sunday. Sergeev, 32, is set to arrive in Tehran on Monday to undergo medical tests ahead of completing his move to Persepolis. He will link up with Uzbekistan teammate Oston Urunov for the second half of the Iranian league season, with the transfer fee and contract length yet to be confirmed by the Capital Reds. Sergeev scored 25 goals and provided three assists in 38 appearances across all competitions as Pakhtakor finished runner-up to Neft-

chi in the Uzbekistan Super League, which concluded in November. Capped 81 times by Uzbekistan, Sergeev has scored 24 international goals – including one in a 2-2 home draw against Iran in the preliminary stage of the World Cup qualifiers in November 2023. The striker missed much of the final round of the Asian qualifiers after suffering a torn cruciate ligament, but returned to action in June, scoring in a 3-0 victory over Qatar to help Uzbekistan secure a maiden World Cup finals berth. The Central Asian side has been drawn in Group K alongside Portugal, Colombia, and one of DR Congo, Jamaica, or New Caledonia at the tournament in

North America next summer. Chasing an eighth league title in a decade, Persepolis sits second in the Iranian top-flight standings with 28 points from 15 matches – two points behind leaders Sepahan – after winning five of its last six games. That run has come since Brazilian head coach Osmar Loss Vieira returned for a second spell in October, replacing Vahid Hashemian. Sergeev's arrival will provide a major boost for the Tehran Reds, who currently have only one established No. 9 in Ali Alipour. His signing is expected to mark the start of a busy mid-season transfer window for Persepolis. The club have also held talks

with Uzbek international full-back Khojikbar Alijonov in recent weeks as a potential replacement for Ivorian defender Serge Aurier, who parted ways with Persepolis on Saturday – along with Iranian winger Farshad Ahmadzadeh – after the former Tottenham and Paris Saint-Germain player made just three starts since joining in the summer. Persepolis are also reportedly considering a move for Shams Azar's young defender Farzin Mo'amelegari, who is currently with the national team in Saudi Arabia for the upcoming AFC U23 Asian Cup, to provide additional competition for Iranian international Miad Mohammadi at left-back.

Iran names freestyle squad for Yasar Dogu tournament



Sports Desk

Iran have named an 11-man wrestling squad for the freestyle competition at the Yasar Dogu, Vehbi Emre & Hamit Kaplan International Tournament, which gets under way on Thursday in Antalya, Turkey. The two-day event will form part of Iran's selection process for major international competitions over the next 12 months, including September's Senior World Championships in Manama, Bahrain, and the Aichi-Nagoya

2026 Asian Games in Japan. Reza Mo'meni, who claimed the national title in late December, will be joined by world U20 silver medalist Ahoura Khateri in the 61kg weight class. Morteza Hajmollamohammadi will compete in the 65kg division despite suffering a final defeat to Peyman Ne'mati at the National Championships in Tabriz. Ali Rezaei – a gold medalist at the 2024 U20 World Championships – will feature in the 74kg category alongside Ali Karampour, who won a world

junior bronze medal two years ago in Pontevedra, Spain. Erfan Alizadeh, a silver medalist at last year's Ranking Series event in Tirana, Albania, and former world U20 champion Abolfazl Babalou will represent Iran in the 97kg division. Abolfazl Mohammadnejad will compete at 125kg as he looks to build on his world U23 gold medal from October. Amir Parasteh (57kg), Mohammadhossein Norouzian (86kg), and Javad Fat'hkhani complete the Iranian roster across eight weight categories.

Taremi scores to help Olympiacos win Greek Super Cup

Sports Desk

Iranian striker Mahdi Taremi was on target as Olympiacos defeated OFI 3-0 to lift the Greek Super Cup trophy on Saturday. The match finished goalless at the end of normal time at the Pankritio Stadium in Heraklion before the Iranian international broke the deadlock in the fifth minute of extra time, smashing home from the penalty spot after substitute Alexios Kalogeropoulos was fouled in the box by Konstantinos Kostoulas. Kalogeropoulos doubled the lead in the 107th min-

ute before Turkish midfielder Yusuf Yazici put the result beyond doubt six minutes later, as Olympiacos completed a domestic treble following last season's league and cup triumphs. "We dominated the match, but it was a difficult opponent that caused us several problems," Olympiacos head coach José Luis Mendilibar said in the post-match press conference. "However, after the first goal in extra time, things became easier for us and the path to victory opened up. Our opponent performed very well and proved to be a worthy

finalist," added the Spaniard. Taremi, meanwhile, took his tally to 12 goals in 20 games across all competitions since joining The Legend from Serie A giants Inter in the summer. Olympiacos sit second in the Greek Super League table with 36 points – one behind archrivals AEK Athens – after 15 rounds of matches. The club is 29th in the 36-team UEFA Champions League table with five points from six games, two points adrift of the final playoff spot with two matches remaining in the league phase.



UFA

Rostamian among air pistol top 10 in ISSF World Ranking

Sports Desk

Iranian shooter Hanieh Rostamian secured top-10 positions in the women's categories of the ISSF World Ranking – Version 2025, released by the International Shooting Sport Federation based on athletes' performances at international events over the past 12 months.

The 27-year-old Iranian ranks seventh in the 25m air pistol discipline and eighth in the 10m air pistol category.

A three-time world bronze medalist, Rostamian reached the final of the 10m air pistol event at November's World Championships in Cairo, Egypt, but narrowly missed out on the podium, finishing fifth with a score of 179.9 points.

She also competed in the final of the 25m event, placing sixth with 16 points.

Rostamian teamed up with fellow Iranian Vahid Golkhandan to claim a joint bronze medal in the 10m air pistol mixed team event at August's Asian Shooting Championships in Shymkent, Kazakhstan. The pair secured the medal with a 16-8 victory over Vietnam's Lai Cong Minh and Nguyen Thuy Trang in the third-

place match.

Golkhandan was the highest-ranked Iranian male shooter in the ISSF World Ranking, standing 15th in the 10m air pistol category. Former Olympic champion Javad Foroughi and Amir Joharikhoo were ranked 69th and 79th, respectively.



IRISSF

Recent rains boost Fanuj's ecotourism potential

Iranica Desk

Recent rainfall in Fanuj, Sistan and Baluchestan Province, has revitalized natural water flows, enhancing the environmental appeal of the Moganshahi tourism area and Fanuj Gorge. With its unique geological formations, pristine landscapes, and rich ecological potential, the region is increasingly recognized as one of the most promising destinations for nature-based tourism development in southern Sistan and Baluchestan.

Situated within the Fanuj Gorge, the Moganshahi tourism area boasts natural pools, seasonal waterfalls, rocky riverbeds, gorge walls, and perennial or seasonal streams. These features create ideal conditions for a wide range of tourism activities, including ecotourism, nature exploration, water-based recreation, and relaxation-oriented travel. Such attributes make the region particularly appealing to visitors seeking untouched natural environments and lesser-known destinations, chtn.ir wrote.

Speaking on the significance of the area for local tourism, Head of Fanuj Tourism Department, Alireza Nosrati stated, "Moganshahi and Fanuj Gorge represent some of the most outstanding natural assets of the city. Thanks to the diversity of landscapes and ecological features, the area has strong potential to be strategically developed as a sustainable tourism destination."



He added, "The natural character of this region calls for a tourism approach that emphasizes ecotourism and conservation, ensuring responsible use of environmental resources while safeguarding them for future generations."

Nosrati further highlighted the role of tourism in local development, "Purposeful tourism development in Moganshahi can serve as a significant economic driver, generating sustainable employment, increasing local incomes, and promoting eco-friendly activities. Engaging



local residents in providing tourism services is essential to the long-term success of the area." Regarding the necessary infrastructure, he emphasized that improving access routes, establishing basic tourism facilities, organizing natural spaces, installing signage, and enhancing visitor safety are key measures to elevate the overall tourism experience in the region.

Nosrati also stressed the importance of scientific and targeted promotion: "Introducing Moganshahi and Fanuj Gorge through specialized tourism programs and leveraging media channels will play a crucial role in raising awareness among domestic tourists and could lead to longer stays in Fanuj." According to tourism experts, the Moganshahi tourism area, with its unspoiled landscapes, ecological diversity, and potential to integrate with other attractions in Fanuj, has the capacity to become one of the major nature tourism hubs in southern Sistan and Baluchestan in the future. With proper planning, sustainable management, and targeted investment, the region could make a substantial contribution to balanced and responsible tourism development.

● bayanbox.ir

Chalab village is center of history, agriculture, traditional arts

Iranica Desk

Chalab, a village in Ilam Province, is a unique place where history, nature, and culture are deeply intertwined. From ancient qanats and fertile lands to handicrafts and relics of the Sacred Defense, the village reflects a rich and multifaceted heritage. According to Dehkhoda's dictionary, "Chalab" refers to a hollow where rainwater or floodwater accumulates. The village was named Chalab due to the presence of qanat wells in the heart of Mehran's arid landscape. To the north lies a centuries-old nomadic station, further emphasizing the region's historical significance.

Omid Esmaeli, an expert at the Ilam Province Governorate, told ISNA that while there are no definitive historical records documenting the village's origin, it is believed to be ancient. Settlers were drawn to the area due to the presence of a river, which provided vital water resources for agriculture and daily life.



Esmaeli explained that during the Iran-Iraq War, Chalab was occupied by the Ba'athist Iraqi regime. Forty-five families from the village sacrificed forty-five martyrs, earning Chalab a distinguished place in the history of the Sacred Defense. He added that the nearest residential areas are Eslamiyeh Town, located 20 kilometers away, and Mehran, 27 kilometers distant. Esmaeli emphasized that Chalab serves as the administrative center for the Chalab and Changole rural districts, providing essential services to surrounding villages.

The village's agricultural water is sourced from the river and local wells, but in recent years, drought has caused water shortages. Currently, four wells with a combined flow of 44 liters per second are used to irrigate 104 hectares of farmland,



● ISNA

while the village's total land spans 7,397 hectares. Due to the lack of suitable slopes in the village pathways, surface water from rainfall is directed to streams and rivers, sometimes causing flooding. Livestock farming is the main occupation in Chalab. The village has 50 hectares of cultivated land, with 30% of residents engaged in animal husbandry, 12% in industry, and 58% in

the services sector. Crops include wheat and barley, and most trade is conducted with Mehran. The village's economic potential includes dairy and meat cattle farming, ostrich and turkey rearing, sheep and goat husbandry, poultry incubation, edible mushroom cultivation, medicinal plant farming, and the cultivation of narcissus flowers. Farzad Sharifi, Director General of Ilam's Cultural Heritage,

Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, told ISNA that Chalab's artisanal and service capacities include felt-making, carpet weaving, floral arts, marquetry, yarn weaving, and chintz weaving. With a long-standing tradition, the village has actively preserved its handicrafts and traditional arts over generations. Today, many residents combine rural life with handicraft production, bringing their creations to market with dedication and enthusiasm.

Sharifi noted that Chalab is one of Ilam Province's most active villages in the realm of traditional arts and handicrafts. Felt-making and crochet remain prevalent, with felt products traditionally used as floor coverings, along with felt coats and hats produced at the village's sole felt workshop. He added that investing in Chalab's handicrafts could serve as an effective strategy for poverty alleviation and regional development in this historically significant area.

Exploring Sheikh Shahabeddin's mausoleum in Ahar

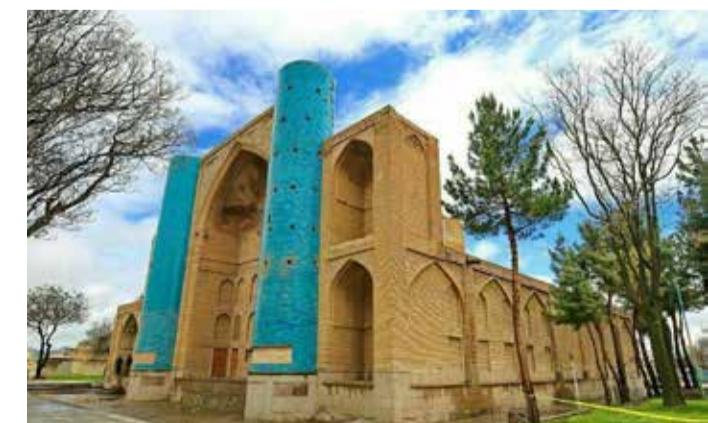
Iranica Desk

Sheikh Shahabeddin Mahmood Ahari was a renowned mystic and scholar of the 7th and 8th centuries, and this mausoleum was constructed over his grave long after his death. According to existing sources, the construction of the mausoleum in Ahar, East Azarbaijan Province, is attributed to the Safavid monarch Shah Abbas I, while the raw brick enclosure surrounding it is credited to Amir-Taymur Gurkan. The building underwent restoration near the end of the 12th century under the supervision of Mostafa Qoil Khan, the governor of the region.

The author of Asar-e-Bastani-e Azerbajan identifies Sheikh Shahabeddin as a descendant of Sheikh Shahabeddin Sohrevardi. He further notes that Sheikh Shahabeddin served as the spiritual master of Seyed Jamaleddin Tabrizi. The current structure of the mausoleum is generally attributed to the Safavid period, although some experts believe that certain parts, such as the stone enclosure of the tomb and the eastern entrance, may date back to pre-Safavid times. The main Ivan of the mausoleum is flanked by a pair of massive minarets, which are not taller than the Ivan itself. It is suggested that the construc-

tion of these minarets might have been left unfinished or that their upper sections were destroyed at a later period. In 1898 CE, portions of the mausoleum underwent restoration, and the surrounding lands were converted into a public park, which continues to serve as a recreational area to this day. Ahar itself is one of the oldest cities in East Azarbaijan, with a history that stretches back to ancient times, including pre-Islamic periods. The city has historically served as an important administrative and cultural center due to its strategic location on trade routes connecting the Caucasus, Iran,

and beyond. Over the centuries, Ahar witnessed numerous invasions and political changes, from local dynasties to the Mongol and Timurid periods, which left their mark on the city's architecture and cultural heritage. The region around Ahar has long been known for its agricultural richness, particularly in grains, fruits, and livestock, supporting both local communities and trade networks. Additionally, the city developed as a center of learning, attracting scholars, poets, and mystics like Sheikh Shahabeddin Mahmood Ahari. Its historical mosques, mausoleums, and caravanserais reflect the



● chtn.ir

city's enduring spiritual and commercial significance. Today, Ahar remains a symbol of the region's layered history, combining cultural, spiritual, and historical importance that continues to draw visitors and researchers alike.

Iran taps arid regions for sustainable tourism push

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's deserts are being positioned as focal points for tourism and cultural preservation, cultural, Heritage, tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri said, emphasizing the role of arid regions in national tourism governance. His commentary, reported by IRIB News, highlighted Khur and Biabanak in Isfahan, Tabas, and the village of Esfahak in South Khorasan as areas where heritage, local society, and environmental adaptation intersect.

Salehi-Amiri described recent visits to these regions as part of a deliberate effort to reassess the relationship between land, heritage, and policy.

"When development disconnects from its historical and territorial context, it becomes externally imposed, unbalanced, and unsustainable," he wrote, stressing that Iran's deserts function as living systems that historically sustain social structures, cultural creativity, and ecological resilience.

The minister outlined a framework emphasizing oversight over direct management, aiming to empower private invest-

ment while maintaining policy stability and institutional trust.

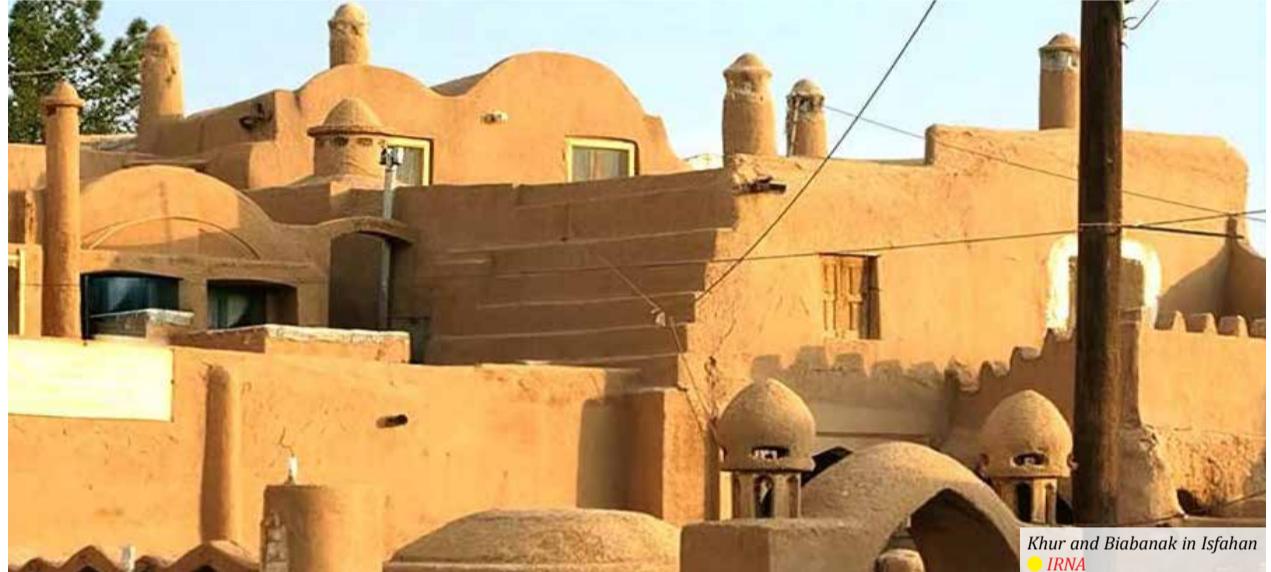
He underscored the importance of collaboration with local communities, noting that tourism development thrives on predictable governance rather than subsidies.

Khur and Biabanak exemplify the convergence of history, culture, and local society. Sites such as the Sassanid-era Bayazeh Castle in Isfahan illustrate the concept of "living heritage," where preservation depends on integrating social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

Similarly, the village of Mers in Isfahan demonstrates how community-led, experience-based desert tourism can strengthen local livelihoods, social identity, and cultural capital.

Amiri also highlighted global heritage registration as a means to bolster local governance and international connectivity rather than as a symbolic accolade.

He pointed to Tabas's Golshan Historical Garden, with its complex irrigation systems and biodiversity, as a potential center for educational, scientific, and eco-tourism, while noting that spiritual tourism, exemplified by the shrine of



Khur and Biabanak in Isfahan
● IRNA

Imamzadeh Hossein ibn Musa al-Kazim, reinforces Iran's cultural-diplomatic profile.

Meetings with officials and investors across Tabas, Ferdows, Boshruyeh, Sarayan, and Eshqabad indicated that

the institutional and infrastructural foundations for tourism growth are increasingly established.

Salehi-Amiri concluded that sustainable development requires coordinated governance, administrative efficiency, and

grounded knowledge of local realities. "Iran's desert is not merely a development challenge; it is a solution," he wrote, advocating a shift from peripheral policy thinking to a central strategic vision.

How producers shape Iran's musical taste

By Alireza Sepahvand
Journalist

PERSPECTIVE EXCLUSIVE

In examining the current state of music in Iran, especially what is prevalent among the younger generation, the prominent role of producers and concert organizers cannot be overlooked. Contrary to the common perception that musical taste is entirely individual and spontaneous, society's auditory preferences, particularly among urban youth, are largely shaped by a guided economic-cultural mechanism. Within this mechanism, the producer is not merely a financial backer, but the primary decision-maker regarding "what should be heard" and "what should be pushed to the margins."

Music as a commodity, not an artwork

In recent years, music in Iran has been viewed less as an independent art form and more as a commodity for rapid consumption and short-term profitability. The decline in album sales, the gradual shutdown of the physical music market, and the expansion of virtual spaces have turned concerts into the main source of income for the music industry. Under such conditions, the criterion for selecting music is not artistic quality, but "marketability."

Producers naturally gravitate toward works that carry lower risk: pieces with fast tempos, simple lyrics, familiar melodies, and arrangements that have al-

ready proven successful. While these patterns may attract audiences in the short term, in the long run they lead to creative poverty, tedious repetition, and the superficialization of the musical landscape.

Concerts as core criterion

In today's Iran, concerts are not merely live performances; they are the beating heart of the music economy. This has led many works to be conceived from the outset with "live performance" in mind, rather than as deep listening experiences. A piece must be designed to excite the crowd, allow for sing-alongs, and create a high-energy, rhythmic atmosphere.

In such an environment, music that requires concentration, silence, or contemplation such as Iranian classical music, regional music, contemporary music, or even artistic pop effectively loses its chance to enter the main concert cycle. This gradual exclusion occurs not because of a lack of potential audience, but due to the absence of "immediate economic viability."

Trivial lyrics, repetition driven by market

When the measure of success for a piece is the number of tickets sold, content inevitably becomes a casualty. In recent years, we have witnessed the spread of lyrics that lack literary depth, imagery, or even linguistic coherence. Romantic clichés, simplistic phrases, and repetitive concepts have replaced personal expression and lived experience. On the other hand, arrangements have also become trapped in a closed loop: Similar rhyth-

mic patterns, identical instrumentation, and excessive use of electronic effects instead of the pursuit of new sounds. This uniformity is neither accidental nor the result of technical inability; rather, it is the direct consequence of market pressure and producers' demand for "guaranteed sales."

No systematic support for serious music

One of the most significant problems in Iran's music scene is the absence of sustained support for serious music across all genres. Serious music does not necessarily mean traditional or classical music; rather, it includes any form of music that seeks experimentation, innovation, or independent artistic expression.

Such music is neither visible in official media, nor taken seriously by concert organizers, nor able to compete economically with commercial projects. The result of this situation is the gradual migration of independent artists toward underground spaces, limited private performances, or the release of works on platforms with small audiences.

Young people: Consumers or victims?

It is not possible to place all responsibility for the current situation on young audiences. Today's youth are not exposed to genuinely diverse choices; instead, what they mostly see and hear is the product of targeted investment. When advertisements, venues, billboards, and social media are saturated with one particular type of music, it is natural for that type to become the "dominant taste."

Taste, contrary to popular belief, is not static or innate; it is constructed, taught, and shaped through repetition. The removal of serious music from public space gradually diminishes society's listening capacity as well.

Closed cycle of producer, singer, and concert

In many cases, the relationship between producer and singer is structured in such a way that the artist becomes effectively trapped within a pre-defined framework. A singer who wishes to try a different path risks losing financial support and performance opportunities. This closed cycle not only limits individual creativity, but also pushes the musical environment toward uniformity, an environment in which difference is considered a risk and repetition a competitive advantage.

An issue beyond taste

What we see today in Iran's mainstream music is not the result of free collective choice, but the outcome of a combination of economic pressures, a concert-centered structure, the absence of institutional support, and the conservative decisions of producers.

If any change is to occur in the musical taste of society, it will not come from blaming the audience, but through reforming production structures, providing genuine support for serious music, diversifying performance spaces, and redefining the role of the producer.

Otherwise, music will continue to revolve around sales loud, bright, and flashy, yet empty of depth and lasting impact.

Iran's 'Sparrow' set for Georgian cinema release



at the 34th Girona Film Festival in Spain. It also earned the Best Actor award for Abbas Ghazali and received nominations for Best Leading Actress for Nahal Dashti and Sheida Khaligh at the Love Film Festival in the United States.

Also, it was honored for Best Music and Best Sound Design at the FICINDIE International Independent Film Festival in the Canary Islands, Spain. The film has been screened at festivals in the Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, and Germany. Produced by Minerva Film in partnership with Lance Film, 'Sparrow' brings together a mixed ensemble cast led by Abbas Ghazali and Sheida Khaligh, alongside Nahal Dashti, Soheil Saei, Sanaz Aghaei and Arash Azizi.