

Copper projects, graphite plant opened in Kerman to boost domestic output



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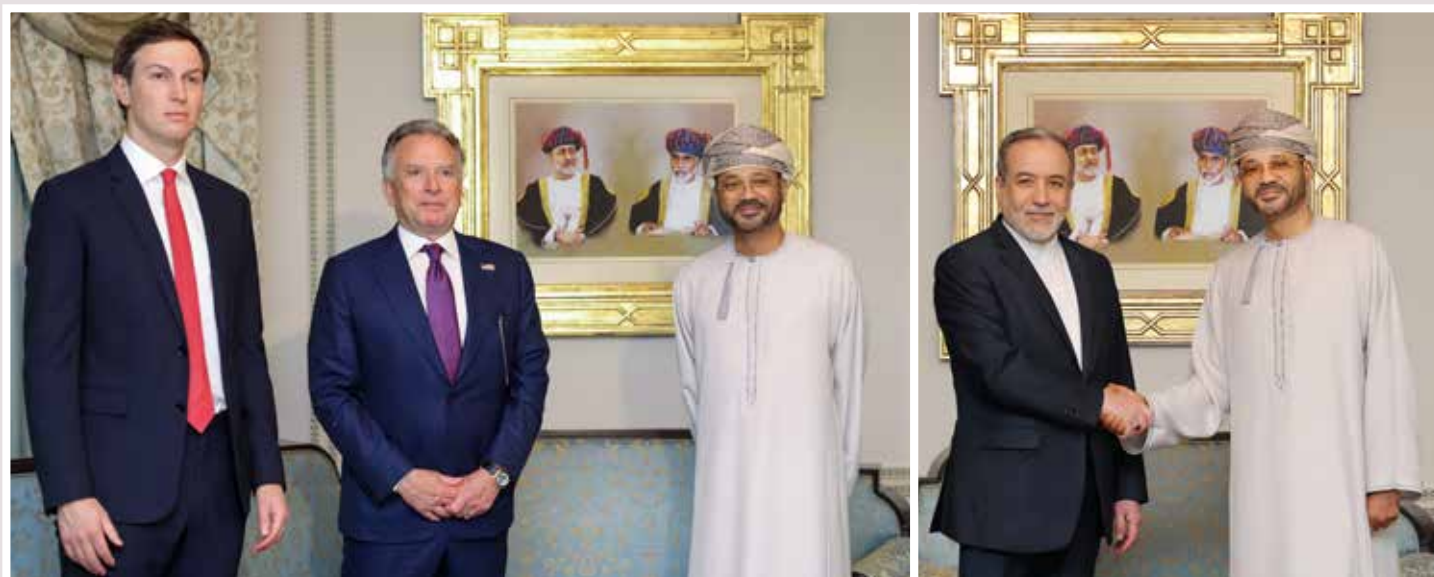
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In this combo photo, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (Right Pic) shakes hands with Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad al-Busaidi in Muscat, Oman on February 6, 2026, while in a separate image taken the same day, al-Busaidi poses for a photograph with US special envoy Steve Witkoff (c) and American President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner ahead of Iran-US talks.

AFP

Iran-US military confrontation, a lose-lose war

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE



Hassan Beheshtipour

In recent weeks, there has been heightened diplomatic activity by regional countries aimed at keeping the Iran-US diplomatic track alive, to the point that, according to some reports, pressure was exerted on Washington to prevent the cancellation of Friday's talks. At the same time, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has described the situation as being at the "brink of explosion," warning that the current situation is explosive not only for Iran alone, but for the entire Middle East. Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping has held phone calls with his Russian and American counterparts, during which Iran was one of the topics discussed. Iran Daily examined the objectives behind the actions and statements of each of these countries in an interview with Hassan Beheshtipour. He believes a military confrontation between Iran and the US would be a lose-lose war, from which all the above states would suffer in different ways, and that each actor is therefore seeking to safeguard its own interests.

IRAN DAILY: What is the main objective behind regional countries' pressure to sustain the negotiations, and what security, economic, or geopolitical concerns have driven them to spare no effort to prevent the talks from collapsing?

BEHESHTIPOUR: First of all, it should be emphasized

that much of what is playing out in the media amounts to a publicity game designed to influence the core of the negotiations. Claims circulated by the media that the talks were about to be canceled and then resumed at the request of regional countries constitute a media-driven scenario. However, this does not mean denying the fact that regional countries are attentive to stability and the prevention of a potential war. Based on their own interests, they view war as detrimental to the region and to their national interests. This applies to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman alike. These countries understand that security and stability serve their interests and have a positive impact on their economic growth. They also know that if a war were to break out between Iran and the US, it would quickly turn into a regional war. That is why they are making efforts to prevent the outbreak of such a conflict, one in which everyone would lose. This would not be a war of victory; it would be a lose-lose war.

How do you assess the Russian foreign minister's remarks, and which specific scenarios is Moscow warning against?

Moscow is also concerned about the emergence of a new war in the Middle East, as it sees such a war as harmful to its own interests. This concern is not rooted in sympathy for Iran; rather, Russia's national interests dictate that it do everything possible on the diplomatic front to prevent the outbreak of a war. Lavrov has stated that Iran is "an important partner" for Russia. Naturally, Moscow does not want this important partner to be weakened, nor does it want the existing balance in the Middle East to tip in Israel's

favor. Preserving a balance of power between Iran and Israel in the region serves Russia's interests. It does not want this balance to unravel, as happened in Syria. This is why Lavrov has described the danger in terms of an explosion. Still, the proposal Russia has put forward is that Iran hand over all of its enriched uranium to Russia. In principle, this proposal is not necessarily a bad one, but the key question is what Iran would receive in return. Russia itself is an exporter of enriched uranium to Iran and other countries, meaning this arrangement would guarantee the preservation of its own market. However, what Iran would gain in exchange has not been clearly specified.

How do you view China's role in managing or containing tensions between Tehran and Washington? Is Beijing seeking a more active role in this equation, or is it simply pursuing its own interests?

In this case, it was the American side that reached out to the Chinese side, and it was also the Russian side that contacted President Xi, not the other way around. These initiatives were taken by Washington and Moscow in order to coordinate with China. President Putin, in fact, contacted President Xi to convey the outcome of his important meeting with [secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali] Larijani [last week] and to seek consultations with the Chinese side. President Trump's call with President Xi, on the other hand, was aimed at pressuring China and into reducing its oil purchases from Iran and scale back cooperation, thereby ratcheting up pressure on Tehran. Viewed from this angle, the entire issue takes on a very different meaning.

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Iran, US agree to resume talks despite ‘prevailing mistrust’

Araghchi hails Muscat negotiations as ‘very good start’

International Desk

Iran and the United States held their first round of new negotiations in Oman on Friday, with the Iranian foreign minister calling the talks “a very good start” but saying that for the resumption of the talks a mistrust caused by the June aggression must first be addressed. “In a very positive atmosphere, our positions and concerns were conveyed and the views of the other side were shared with us,” Araghchi told Iranian state TV, adding that, “There was almost agreement on continuing the negotiations, and it was agreed that they would continue.” “Overall, I can say that it was a good start, but its continuation depends on holding consultations in the capitals and deciding how to proceed.” He noted that the timing and way of the next round of talks will be determined in subsequent consultations through the Omani foreign minister. He described a mistrust that has

developed after strikes by the US and Israel on Iran in June as a serious challenge facing the negotiations, saying that, “We must first address this issue, and then enter into the next level of negotiations.” The sides agreed to once again begin a process of talks eight months after Israel’s war against Iran led to immense distrust and a significant challenge to negotiations, he said. “We must first overcome this prevailing atmosphere of distrust, and only then can we design a framework for a new dialogue, one that can... secure the interests of the Iranian people,” Araghchi pointed out. In a separate interview with IRNA, he underlined that the discussions were exclusively focused on the nuclear issue and they are not addressing any other subject. He also said that the Iranian delegation in Oman stressed that any talks must take place “without threats.” “The prerequisite for any dialogue is to refrain from threats

and pressure,” Araghchi said. “We raised this point clearly today and we expect it to be adhered to in order to allow for the continuation of the talks.” Araghchi led the Iranian negotiating team while US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff led the American delegation, accompanied by President Donald Trump’s son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner. Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM) also attended the negotiations in Oman. The Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi in a post on social media said that his country mediated “very serious talks.” “It was useful to clarify both Iranian and American thinking and identify areas for possible progress,” Albusaidi said. “We aim to reconvene in due



Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (C) speaks to Iranian media following the talks between Iran and the US in Muscat, Oman on February 6, 2026. ● IRNA

course, with the results to be considered carefully in Tehran and Washington,” he added, without providing an exact timeline for when the next round of discussions might take place. The talks in Oman came amid a crisis that has raised fears of a

military confrontation between the two countries after a US military buildup in the region on the pretext of Iran's response to recent riots in the country, which were triggered by nationwide protests last month over economic problems. According to the Iranian offi-

cials more than 3,100 people have lost their lives in the protests. Last year, Iran had held five rounds of talks on a replacement for the 2015 nuclear deal but the US-Israeli airstrikes on the country derailed the negotiations.

Aliyev: Azerbaijani territory not to be used for anti-Tehran threats

‘Azerbaijan ready to help ease Iran-US tensions’



Iran's Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh (L) shakes hands with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during a meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan on February 6, 2026. ● IRNA

importance for Iran, which borders both Azerbaijan and Armenia. “We want peace throughout the world, no bloodshed, no wars,” Aliyev was quoted as saying, stressing that Azerbaijan exemplifies a successful transition from war to peace. Highlighting the positive results of a last year visit by the Iranian president to Azerbaijan, Aliyev stated that “relations have developed further since that visit,” the statement said. “During the conversation, they noted the development of bilateral relations based on principles of friendship, brotherhood, and good-neighborliness between the two countries, and exchanged views on prospects for defense cooperation,” the statement added. Nasirzadeh delivered a message from Pezeshkian to Aliyev and said he had travelled to Baku at the Iranian president’s instruction.

International Desk

Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev said his country will not allow its territory to be used for any threat against Iran, amid US threats of military aggression against the Islamic Republic. Aliyev made the remarks on Friday during a meeting in Baku with Iran’s Defense Minister, Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh, where the two sides discussed regional security developments. Aliyev stressed that within the framework of friendly and brotherly ties between the two countries, Azer-

baijan would not permit any action from its soil that could pose a threat to Iran. He also underlined the importance of relations between the two neighboring states, noting their shared historical, cultural and religious ties. Aliyev said Azerbaijan has consistently regarded Iran’s stability and security as significant for the broader region. The Azerbaijani president also on Friday reaffirmed his country’s readiness to help de-escalate tensions between Iran and the United States, which have deteriorated in

recent months over a range of issues including Iran’s nuclear program. The Azerbaijani president said during his recent phone call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on January 21 he had expressed concern about the situation in the region and had offered help, according to a statement by Azerbaijan’s presidential office. Aliyev said on Friday that while conflicts continue in many parts of the world, peace has already been established in the South Caucasus – an issue that he said is of great

Global optimism on Muscat-mediated Iran-US talks

International Desk

Many countries reacted to new round of negotiations between Iran and the United States in Oman, expressing hope that the talks would lead to positive results. The Kremlin said on Friday that it hoped that negotiations between Iran and the United States in Oman would yield results and lead to a de-escalation and urged all sides to show restraint in the meantime. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry also issued a statement on Friday, saying that Cairo welcomes diplomatic efforts aimed at reviving dialogue between Washington and Tehran. Egypt said the current diplomatic momentum offered a chance to reach a balanced agreement that addresses the concerns of all parties and avoids further escalation in a region already facing heightened tensions. The ministry reiterated Cairo’s long-standing position that the Iranian nuclear issue cannot be resolved through military means, warning that any confrontation would have consequences for

the entire Middle East. It said Egypt would continue coordinating with regional partners in support of negotiations that preserve the interests of all sides and contribute to wider regional stability. Meanwhile, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah and his Egyptian counterpart Badr Abdelatty expressed hope that differences between Iran and the US would be resolved through diplomatic means, warning that military options will complicate the situation in the region. China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian also stressed that dialogue was the pathway to resolve tensions between the two sides. He said China “hopes all parties will resolve differences through dialogue and jointly keep the region peaceful and stable.” German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who was on a three-day tour in the region, said concerns about Iran are “very, very high” among regional leaders, calling on Tehran to return to negotiations with the US and end its nuclear program.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

CARTOON



Copper projects, graphite plant opened in Kerman to boost domestic output

Economy Desk

Industry, Mining and Trade Minister Mohammad Atabak on Thursday inaugurated expansion projects at the Sarcheshmeh Copper Mine Complex in Rafsanjan, Kerman Province, while also launching several industrial and agricultural initiatives across four counties in the southeastern province. Atabak emphasized the need to elevate Iran's position in refined copper production, stating, "A copper research center must be established in this province and students and elites present here should be attracted," ISNA reported. He noted Kerman ranks eighth nationally in value-added production, calling the position strong but adding that the province's copper and mining advantages could rapidly increase value-added output if converted to processing activities. Addressing project timelines, Atabak said many initiatives lose economic viability when prolonged, adding, "The expectation is that copper implementation plans, which should create added value, reach completion faster through scheduled programming."

Global copper standing

The minister stated the country ranks fifth globally in refined

copper resources, noting, "Even if we reach third place, the copper production chain must be completed in a way that related exports become logical," IRNA reported.

He also observed rising copper consumption globally and said price trends indicate copper holds the highest value among commodities in capital markets. During his visit to Kerman, Atabak also inaugurated multiple industrial and agricultural developments.

Also, Mostafa Feiz Ardakani, managing director of the National Iranian Copper Industries Company (NICIC), said at the opening ceremony, "Iran possesses 66 million tons of copper reserves, placing it sixth globally in copper resources."

"The copper company has 72 projects under implementation or preparation — the largest project portfolio in the country — requiring precise oversight and special attention, which we have designed and developed across 23 strategic programs," he said.

Fayyaz Ardakani outlined production targets to reach one million tons of refined copper, 800,000 tons of cathode, and over four million tons of concentrate, which he said would generate \$10 billion in annual revenue for the country.

He stressed the importance of

expanding the company's product basket alongside chain development, stating such efforts could significantly contribute to short- and medium-term objectives through technological and international partnerships. "The copper company must maintain deep connections with technology and commerce to offer its products at a global standard," he said.

He said the company is 3% ahead of schedule in refined copper production and 6% ahead in concentrate output for the current year, which began March 21.

Despite logistical and foreign exchange challenges, he said the company executed intelligent sales strategies when possible, resulting in increased global dollar pricing for cathode and strong rial-denominated growth in domestic sales. These results contributed to a 147% return for shareholders of the company's stock in the capital market. Project progress reached 11.5% over the past ten months, marking improved performance compared to the same period last year.

Eight-producer club

Separately, on Wednesday during Atabak's trip to Yazd Province in central Iran, the country's first graphite electrode producer — and the



Industry, Mining and Trade Minister Mohammad Atabak (R) inaugurates a project at the Sarcheshmeh Copper Mine Complex in Rafsanjan, Kerman Province on February 5, 2026.

● mimt.gov.ir

Middle East's first — was inaugurated in Ardakan county. The facility has an annual capacity of 30,000 tons, expandable to 60,000 tons in a development phase, and has created 530 jobs. It produces ultra-high-power (UHP) graphite electrodes in diameters ranging from 300 to 750 millimeters, along with corresponding cores for electric arc furnaces and graphite blocks.

Saeed Zarandi, chief executive of Mobarakeh Steel Group, said on the sidelines of the inauguration, "Iran is joining the group of eight global graphite electrode producers, achieving annual savings of 54 million euros through this localization effort."

He described graphite electrodes as among the most essential and strategic inputs in steelmaking, noting the country

had previously relied entirely on imports. Zarandi added that Mobarakeh Steel Group's annual requirement totals approximately 27,600 tons. The new 30,000-ton plant in its first phase can fully localize the majority of the group's needs. Trial production has been successfully completed, and the facility is prepared to supply the group's entire electrode demand domestically starting next year.

OIETAI: 600-plus investment requests worth \$17b approved since March



Economy Desk

Iran has approved more than 600 foreign investment requests valued at \$17 billion since the beginning of the current year, which started on March 21, according to official data.

The Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA) reported Friday that the Organization for Investment Economic and Technical Assistance of Iran (OIETAI) stated 83 investment

proposals were reviewed during one session of the Foreign Investment Board in recent weeks, followed two weeks later by another session examining 36 foreign investment requests across multiple economic sectors. The proposals covered renewable energy production and solar power plants, pharmaceutical and health industries, housing, support and international transportation services, petroleum

derivatives production, services and other industrial sectors. Investors originated from Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Iraq, Oman and Iranians residing abroad.

The two sessions collectively resulted in approval of 105 investment projects — 70 projects worth \$3.564 billion in the first session and 35 projects valued at \$198 million in the second — bringing the total approved value to more than \$3.7 billion.

The Foreign Investment Board convenes monthly at the Investment Organization, where numerous foreign investment applications undergo review and approval. Twelve sessions have been held since the start of the current year, with the cumulative approvals reaching the \$17 billion threshold.

Peak for rail operations: Deputy min. reports 3,600 km railway expansion in year



Iranian Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development Hooshang Bazvand (2nd R) attends a test train journey on the newly completed railway route from Mianeh to Ardabil in northwestern Iran, February 6, 2026.

● IRNA

Economy Desk

Iranian Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development Hooshang Bazvand announced Friday that approximately 3,600 kilometers of railway are under construction across the country, describing the current year (which began on March 21) as one of the most flourishing periods for rail-laying and railway opera-

tions in Iran.

Speaking during a test train journey on the railway route from Mianeh to Ardabil in northwestern Iran, Bazvand, who also serves as CEO of the Railway Infrastructure Development Company, stated, "This year the railway routes of Ardabil-Mianeh with 145 kilometers and Khash-Irانشahr with 152 kilometers will become op-

erational and rail-laying of nearly 300 kilometers from Iran-shahr to Chabahar (in southeastern Iran) will also be completed."

Regarding the test journey on the Mianeh-Ardabil route, he said, "Fortunately this important demand of the people, namely the Ardabil-Mianeh railway, has been realized."

He added that currently the officials and technical staff at the ministry "are engaged in monitoring everything on this railway route and the test journey so that this journey reaches its destination well and the project is prepared for official inauguration with the presence of national authorities."

Semnan expands solar power capacity with 100 MW plant inauguration

Economy Desk

A 100-megawatt solar power plant in the Dezh region of Shahrud in Semnan Province has been inaugurated and become operational, marking a key step in the northeastern province's renewable energy development, Deputy Governor and Special Governor of Shahrud Mohammad Hassan Asfari said in

an interview with ISNA. "This project has been fully completed," Asfari stated. "Some of these plans have been implemented in a short period, so that solar power plants have reached the operational stage in less than six months."

According to IRNA, a separate memorandum of understanding for construction of another 100-megawatt solar power

plant in Semnan Province has been signed. The project, beyond producing clean electricity and advancing renewable energy development, will create a sustainable income source for 20,000 people and increase the province's contribution to the country's renewable energy expansion.

Semnan Province holds a commitment of 2,600

megawatts for solar power plant construction to fulfill its role in addressing the nation's energy imbalance. To date, 3,100 megawatts of solar power generation contracts have been signed and 5,000 hectares of land have been delivered to investors, with 213 megawatts of the province's solar power commitment already connected to the national grid.

Efforts to attract investors through various channels continue across the province. Recently, a bilateral memorandum of understanding was signed between Semnan Governorate and the national Imam Khomeini Relief Committee for construction of a 100-megawatt power plant with shareholding by 20,000 beneficiaries of the support institution.



● ISNA

Hedging bets with a Turkey-Saudi-Pakistan pact



By Tim Chattell

Chief of the General Staff's
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OPINION

On January 9, Bloomberg reported that Turkey was 'likely' to join the defense pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and that talks to do so were in an 'advanced' stage. Later that month Pakistan's Minister for Defense Production told Reuters that a draft defense deal between the three countries had been prepared.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan agreed a defensive pact in September 2025, following American inaction on two occasions: Initially in 2019, when Iranian drone attacks on Saudi Arabia failed to elicit more than mild condemnation from Washington; and in 2025, when Israel's attacks on Qatar were met only with lukewarm rebuke.

The potential inclusion of Turkey into the alliance has received mixed reactions from Turkish commentators. Some interpret the anonymous briefing as more of a messaging strategy than concrete statement of intent. It remains to be seen whether the alliance will come to pass.

Opportunities

Certainly, a level of 'synergy' could exist in a Pakistan-Saudi-Turkey alliance. Turkey and Pakistan both have developed, modern defense economies which specialize in different sectors, and have become increasingly linked in recent years. The countries have a long history of cooperation on shipbuilding and fighter pilot training.

Turkey could provide access to NATO standards of training – by the standards of the Middle East, Turkey's military is highly effective and capable – as well as large-scale shipbuilding facilities. Saudi finance would be welcome in reinforcing Turkey's inflation-battered economy, just as it has been in Pakistan.

The idea that this might be an 'Islamic NATO' is misleading – most Muslim states sit outside the alliance, and religion lacks any real salience in regional foreign policy. But the alliance would likely be well-received by Turkish President Recep Erdogan's base, as well as playing into his own desire to be seen as a leader of the Muslim world.

Furthermore, historic tensions between Ankara and Riyadh have been more effectively managed since 2022, and no major international issue (currently) divides the three countries.

Turkey was content to side with Pakistan against India during their brief confrontation last year, going so far as



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) welcomes Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman during a ceremony in Ankara, Turkey on June 22, 2022.

● ADEM ALTAN/AFP

Opportunism

Some commentators have suggested the move indicates a lack of faith in NATO, following recent 'America First' belligerence. But such an explanation is insufficient. Even in the event of an American departure from NATO, European members would likely work hard to keep Turkey in the alliance, aligned against Russia, with whom it remains locked in competition.

The flexibility offered by an alternative defensive structure would allow it to shape NATO policy, by threatening to withhold its own forces.

If Turkey enters into a formal alliance with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it would represent a broader regional trend of 'hedging': should NATO become unreliable in the future, Turkey is made more secure by a new, separate defense agreement.

But a new alliance would also represent a continuation of a uniquely Turkish policy of opportunism. Just as Turkey has reached out (or loudly announced it is reaching out) to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), 'hedging' affords not only alternatives to alliances like NATO, but crucially leverage within them.

A Saudi-Pakistan alliance, even with a less credible nuclear deterrent, gives the Turkish state options in the event of a NATO Article Five scenario.

The flexibility offered by an alternative defensive structure would allow it to shape NATO policy, by threatening to withhold its own forces, or to 'opt out' of alliance commitments. That can only have more weight as US commitment to NATO shrivels. Even just announcing the move has the desired effect of messaging Turkey's lack of dependence on its existing alliance partners – strengthening its hand.

The same effect can apply to other long-running Turkish foreign policy aims, whether EU accession, cooperation within BRICS; a move towards full SCO membership; partnership across the Turkic Central Asia region; and mediating international conflicts.

In each case, Turkey sees the opportunities provided by 'bridging East and West' as not just securing the state, but demonstrating its independence, offering it leverage within each successive power bloc.

The article was first published in English by Chatham House.



Talk of Turkey joining a Saudi-Pakistan defense pact reflects Ankara's broader hedging strategy: creating alternative security options not to replace NATO, but to gain leverage within it while projecting strategic autonomy.

with a NATO state such as Greece. Turkey could pursue a technology transfer from Pakistan without a binding alliance. But that would mean leaving the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and risking international isolation.

Most compellingly, within NATO, Turkey is already protected by American and British nuclear weapons: of considerably higher quality and reliability than Pakistan's. Up to fifty American nuclear bombs are already stationed at Incirlik air base.

Ankara may view the alliance as a way to shore up its regional power, build its export base, acquire foreign currency, or develop its ballistic technology. But it could achieve such goals without committing to a binding mutual defense agreement. Its own armed forces are comparatively strong. And the ongoing peace process with the PKK in Turkey, and integration of the SDF in Syria, leaves it yet more secure. A Saudi-Pakistan alliance offers Ankara nothing that NATO or other agreements cannot do better. So why bother?



Pakistan's military vehicles carrying missiles Nasr (Front) and Babur (Back) take part in the military parade to mark Pakistan's National Day in Islamabad on March 25, 2021.

● AAMIR QURESHI/AFP

Turkey at the threshold: Foreign policy tests in 2026



By Murat Yeşiltaş

Foreign policy expert

OPINION

As the world enters 2026, Turkish foreign policy has transitioned into a period of "threshold management." This period can be defined as a transition marked by the persistence of crises in the immediate neighborhood, the geographical and sectoral expansion of great power competition, and the increasingly visible need for alignment between economic and institutional capacity and geopolitical claims.

During this period, Turkey has been striving to adopt a diplomatic approach that is flexible, multitasked and fo-

cused on crisis management, rather than relying on a single strategic axis. As we enter 2026, the fundamental question is whether this flexibility will translate into a strategic advantage or whether tensions and costs between different issues will accumulate, narrowing the scope for action.

In this context, the general trend in 2025 has been to pursue the goals of maintaining Türkiye's claim to strategic autonomy more than ever before, while at the same time keeping its position within NATO functional and strengthening the regional security belt. On the other hand, 2025 was a year in which Türkiye learned from strategic and tactical lessons from multidimensional tensions, conflicts and constraints experienced

on many levels. The year 2026 may be a year in which these lines of tension, possible conflict dynamics, and constraints are tested, putting Turkey's strategic autonomy to the test even more.

Fragmented world politics

The overall outlook for world politics from 2025 to 2026 points to a scenario where four key dynamics are intensifying. The first is the expansion of great power competition, which is taking on a multidimensional character, not only through military balances but also through technology restrictions, supply chains, critical raw materials, data and digital infrastructure, sanctions regimes, and defense-industrial capacity (ammunition production, air defense, unmanned systems,

electronic warfare capabilities). Investments in conventional warfare capabilities among global powers, increasing global arms race trends, and military modernization processes stand out as developments aimed at altering the military power balance in great power competition. This situation both expands the bargaining power of middle powers and acts as a serious pressure factor on them.

Secondly, the international security architecture is undergoing simultaneous stress tests in four critical regions: Europe, the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific and East Africa. The interaction between these lines both divides the strategic attention of major powers and creates a perception of a "window of opportunity," albeit limited, for region-

al actors. The increase in the number of armed conflicts over the past decade, combined with the parallel trend of "national security-centered hardening" in states' foreign policies, shows that the dynamics of escalation are more complex and fragile. Therefore, the nature of the risk of escalation stems not only from regional rivalries but also from a systemic fragility that is multidimensional, multiactor and intertwined with nuclear dynamics. The most critical vulnerability of military-strategic competition in 2026 is the possibility that a minor tactical incident could rapidly escalate into a strategic crisis involving major powers.

The resurgence of the Iran-Israel conflict, the intensification of the

Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, the re-emergence of the Pakistan-India conflict, the possibility that the ongoing war in Ukraine will not end but will continue to intensify, the civil war in Sudan, the potential internal conflict in Somalia, the military engagement against the Houthis in Yemen fueling asymmetric conflicts, and tensions between the United States and Venezuela could push the competition beyond controllable limits.

The third is the widening gap between the normative claim of the international order and the power politics on the ground: Although rules and institutions continue to exist, deterrence, coalitions and temporary alliances are becoming more decisive in resolving conflicts. The opposite situation may also be true: political and military engagements that are not based on rules and international legitimacy may deepen the conflict. This shows that the rules-based international system is weakening rather than strengthening.

The fourth intensifying dynamic is the chronic nature of crises and the increased risk of their spread. Issues such as the Gaza war and its regional consequences, the challenges faced in building the state and security architecture in Syria, and the impact of the Ukraine war in the Black Sea on maritime security and trade routes point to the existence of prolonged risks in 2026, rather than a temporary wave. In this environment, while European security is seeking a new defense-industrial transformation, the security architecture in the Middle East is being reshaped in a fragmented and competitive manner. Potential tensions centered in the Asia-Pacific region also place security-related vulnerabilities at the forefront. Consequently, 2026 stands out as a year in which both the search for regional order accelerates and vulnerabilities become entrenched.

Turkey's orientation

Within this global framework, it is possible to interpret Turkish foreign policy around three main themes during the 2025-2026 transition: the security axis and the immediate neighborhood; alliances, balancing and multilateralism; geo-economics, connectivity, and capacity. These themes are not disconnected from one another; on the contrary, in a period of increasing interconnectivity between issues, developments in one area directly affect the scope for action in other areas.

From a security perspective, the transition from 2025 to 2026 shows that risks in Turkey's immediate neighborhood have taken on a "multifaceted" nature. Here, the Black Sea, Syria and Israel, along with the Eastern Mediterranean, have become three sub-areas that influence each other within the same security equation.

Black Sea security

The prolonged conflict in the Black Sea creates a framework that constantly tests Turkey's role within NATO and its regional stability policy. The need for maritime security, continuity of trade and limiting the geographical spread of the conflict is pushing Ankara to maintain deterrence and collective defense on the one hand, while seeking "controlled stability" in the Black Sea on the other. In particular, the testing of Black Sea security and the homeland defense line by Russian-made drones at the end of the year has placed the need to deepen military capacity at the center of Turkey's foreign and security policy as a critical issue. In this context, the cornerstone of Turkey's balancing policy is to maintain a line that does not upset regional power balances or escalate tensions but makes security risks manageable. The primary risk in the Black Sea in 2026 is that the war will continue to have an indirect impact on maritime security and critical infrastructure/logistics lines, simultaneously challenging both Turkey's economic connectivity and security priorities.

YPG as Israel's hand in Syria

The transition to 2026 in the Syria file means the simultaneous management of the triad of field security, state building and diplomatic normalization. From



Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan speaks at the opening of the 16th Ambassadors' Conference, Ankara, Turkey on December 15, 2025.
● DHA

Turkey's perspective, security priorities in the field are directly linked not only to border security and counterterrorism but also to whether the governance architecture that emerges in Syria will produce long-term stability. The emphasis on inclusivity and national unity at this point is not merely a normative preference, but a strategic framework carrying security rationality: An order that deepens internal legitimacy and can involve national actors in a Damascus-centered state-building process reduces the risk of fragmentation and limits the reproduction of cross-border security threats.

The aforementioned objective necessitates the implementation of military and diplomatic deterrence to eliminate the YPG issue without delay. However, Israel's disruptive influence in Syria and the fragile balances on the ground may make it possible for "external factors" to exploit the axis of inclusivity, thereby complicating the achievement of the desired outcomes. In 2026, the decisive test in this file will be the slowing integration processes, the position of some armed actors, and the possibility that Israel's security reflexes on the ground will erode its capacity to produce stability. Therefore, 2026 stands out as a year in which Turkey will seek to reinforce its deterrence by using "hard balancing" methods in Syria and in which the constraints on Israel will be tested.

Anti-Turkey axis in East Med

At this point, we see that the Israeli factor has been added as a critical layer to the security axis as a whole. In the transition from 2025 to 2026, the competition between Turkey and Israel is no longer limited to tactical tensions in Syria but is extending to the wider Eastern Mediterranean. In the process of rebuilding Syria's security architecture, Israel's security orientation clashes with Turkey's border security and stability priorities, which makes the competition more visible and riskier. However, the Eastern Mediterranean dimension of the competition has become the main factor reinforcing the structural nature of the issue.



In 2026, Turkey's "threshold management" means balancing strategic autonomy, NATO commitments and regional crises while aligning geopolitical aims with economic capacity.



Interlinked tensions in the Black Sea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, especially involving Israel and the YPG, risk militarizing disputes, testing Turkey's alliances and geo-economic resilience.



Turkey is at the center of the realignment trend along the Israel, Greece and Greek Cypriot administration axis, because this realignment is often legitimized by a strategic rationale aimed at limiting Ankara's influence over maritime jurisdiction areas, energy and connectivity corridors. Thus, Turkey is not merely the "opposing actor" in this axis; it has become the central variable determining the reason, pace and form of the realignment.

An important consequence of this competition is the risk that the struggle for position in the political-diplomatic arena will increasingly shift to a militarized domain. Energy projects, disputes over maritime jurisdiction, joint air and sea exercises, defense cooperation agreements and discussions on regional basing are making it difficult for diplomacy to remain at a low-cost level of rhetoric, paving the way for security interactions in which deterrence demonstrations are increasingly employed.

Intertwined security issues

In 2026, two effects of this shift will come to the fore: First, the likelihood of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean will increase, raising the risk of miscalculation. Second, the interconnection between issues will deepen: developments in Syria will affect the military-diplomatic balance in the Eastern Mediterranean, while alignments in the Eastern Mediterranean may directly affect Turkey's bargaining space in its alliance policy and regional strategic calculations.

Therefore, the Israeli factor in 2026 is not a single crisis issue for Turkey. It has become a multilayered arena of competition that must be managed simultaneously on land and sea. Consequently, Israel's shift from its 2016-2022 geo-economically centered (primarily energy-related) moves against Turkey toward military balancing and "military provocation" in the new period could lead to a more severe rupture in Ankara's security paradigm than ever before and shift the tension between Türkiye and Israel from the political to the military axis.

Alliances as answer

The second main theme in Turkish foreign policy is alliances, balancing and multilateralism. Throughout 2025, Turkey's capacity for bargaining within alliances became more pronounced, as it continued to keep its national security priorities on the table while remaining part of the deterrence and collective defense agenda within the NATO context. This line could be tested in two ways in the transition to 2026. The first is the transformation in the European security architecture: the trend toward increased

defense spending, joint procurement and defense industry capacity expansion presents both opportunities and risks for Turkey. The opportunity lies in the possibility of industrial partnerships and integration into supply chains, particularly through programs such as the Security Action for Europe (SAFE). The risk lies in the strengthening of exclusionary mechanisms in institutional and financial instruments. Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration's attempts to consolidate an anti-Turkey front within Europe in defense and security architecture discussions may accelerate Ankara's search for alternative forms of relations. Second is the nature of relations with the US. A more realistic reading of the Turkey-US relationship in 2026 will be framed by "controlled coordination and crisis management" rather than "strategic alignment." Technical processes in the defense field, particularly Turkey's removal from CAATSA, and the need for coordination on the ground may foster cooperation, but mutual distrust will maintain fragility. Therefore, Turkey's success in 2026 will depend on its ability to sustain alliance relations not solely through normative alignment but through mechanisms that function on concrete dossiers and crisis management capacity.

Economic sustainability

The third theme in Turkey's foreign policy is geoeconomics, connectivity and capacity. The performance of Turkish foreign policy in the transition from 2025 to 2026 will be measured not only by security moves but also by economic sustainability. Energy supply security, the role of transit country, transportation corridors, and critical infrastructure projects increase Turkey's geopolitical value. But this value is directly related to parameters such as financing conditions, investment climate and risk premium. Therefore, the alignment of foreign policy and the economy becomes even more critical in 2026.

Uncertainties that increase the cost of diplomatic moves may narrow the room for maneuver. Conversely, the economic capacity generated through connectivity and supply chain integration can strengthen diplomatic flexibility. Defense industry diplomacy is a separate lever here. Platform exports, joint production models, and technology collaborations can provide Turkey with both geopolitical influence and economic resilience.

Test for Turkish foreign policy

As a result, the overall state of Turkish foreign policy in the transition from 2025 to 2026 points to a "balance and capacity" test: striving to maintain strategic autonomy under conditions of high uncertainty; aiming to build a security belt in the immediate neighborhood while simultaneously keeping alliance relations functional; and having to support this with geo-economic capacity. The decisive parameters in 2026 will be the capacity to exert diplomatic influence in chronic crises such as Gaza and Syria; the ability to manage the impact of the war in the Black Sea on maritime security and connectivity lines; the ability to keep the militarization trend extending from Syria to the Eastern Mediterranean, driven by Israeli-Turkish competition, under control; the extent to which it can integrate into Europe's defense-industrial transformation; the capacity to maintain file-based coordination with the US without creating fragility; and the ability to combine all of this within a strategic framework compatible with economic sustainability. When these parameters come together positively, 2026 could be a year in which multitrack diplomacy becomes a strategic advantage for Turkey. Conversely, the same flexibility could evolve into fragility that narrows the scope for action as tensions and costs accumulate between issues.

The article first appeared on Daily Sabah.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan (l) and Syrian counterpart Assad Hasan Shaybani watch Damascus from Mount Qasioun, Damascus, Syria on December 22, 2025.
● AA

AFC Futsal Asian Cup:

Iran rallies past Iraq to advance to final

Sports Desk

Iran came from behind twice to defeat Iraq 4-2 on Friday and progress to the AFC Futsal Asian Cup final in Jakarta, Indonesia. Standing between the defending champion and a record-extending 14th title in 18 editions in today's showdown will be Indonesia. The host nation, inspired by a roaring home crowd at the Indonesia Arena, stunned Japan 5-3 after extra time later on Friday to reach a maiden final at the flagship continental event. Iraq, which pulled off a 4-2 upset against Thailand in the quarterfinals, took the lead in the 10th minute, opening the scoring through Salim Kadhim, who dispossessed Saeid Ahmadabasi on the halfway line before surging forward to find the bottom corner. The lead, however, lasted only a minute, with Ahmadabasi redeeming himself by delivering a perfect reverse pass to Mohammadhossein Derakhshani, who swept home from close range with Iraq custodian Ibrahim Ahmed rooted. Iraq restored the advantage in the 13th minute after Ghaith Riyadh's free-kick found Salim Kadhim, whose initial effort

was blocked by Iranian keeper Baqer Mohammadi before he stretched out a leg while still on the ground to flick home the rebound. Iran, yet to trail at halftime in the tournament, ensured it maintained that record as it equalized through a stunning long-range strike from Behrouz Azimi three minutes before the break. There were chances at both ends after the interval, with Kadhim slicing an effort wide before attempts from Azimi, Salar Aqapour and Amirhossein Gholami failed to beat Ahmed. Ahmed then did well to tip away Mahdi Mahdikhani's shot in the 26th minute but conceded from the ensuing corner as Hossein Tayyebi arrived first to the ball to flick past the Iraqi keeper for his fifth goal of the competition. Iraq was denied an equalizer in the 30th minute when Derakhshani came to Iran's rescue, clearing Kadhim's strike off the goal line after Mohammadi had been caught out of position. Iran spurned an opportunity to widen the gap four minutes later after being awarded a penalty for Tareq Zeyad's foul on Mahdi Karimi, but Tayyebi's effort was saved by Ahmed. Aqapour, however, struck in



Salar Aqapour (L) and Behrouz Azimi celebrate Iran's four goal during a 4-2 victory over Iraq at the AFC Futsal Asian Cup in Jakarta, Indonesia, on February 5, 2026.
● AFC

the 40th minute to send Iran through to a sixth successive final. Despite the victory, Iran head coach Vahid Shamsaei blamed his players' lack of conviction in

front of goal.

"We are in the final, but my expectations of my team's performance were much higher than what they showed today," said the Iranian futsal great, who

lifted the Asian Cup trophy as a player on eight occasions.

"Iranian players are capable of making a much bigger impact, and we can't afford to waste so many chances as we did today.

My team hit the post five times, missed a penalty, and squandered numerous scoring opportunities. That allowed Iraq to score against us from just two chances. I take full responsibility for these technical shortcomings, but we have no right to repeat these mistakes," Shamsaei added.

Shamsaei's opposite number on the Iraqi bench, Joao Carlos, meanwhile, expressed a sense of achievement after his side gave the Asian powerhouse a scare before bowing out of the competition.

"We gave a good fight against a strong team," said Carlos. "We know Iran's quality, but at times we had control. We don't like to lose, but we finish this match with our heads held high.

"We have young players and our league is growing. We have 16 teams, but our players need to continue playing in tournaments of this level.

"Twice we were in the lead, and at those moments we needed to play with more intelligence and tactical awareness. But that comes with experience. We played against an amazing team who know exactly how to control the match – that was the difference."

Zagreb Open Ranking Series:

Yazdani stumbles in new weight class as Iran secures 10 medals

Sports Desk

Iranian freestyle wrestler Hassan Yazdani was given a harsh reality check in his pursuit of an elusive second Olympic gold after being outclassed by low-profile American Stephen Buchanan in the 97kg final at the Zagreb Open on Friday.



Iranian freestyle wrestler Hassan Yazdani (R) is seen in action against American Stephen Buchanan in the 97kg final at the Zagreb Open in Zagreb, Croatia, on February 5, 2026.
● JAKE KIRKMAN/UWW

Making his first international appearance since his 86kg final setback at the Paris Olympics 18 months ago, Yazdani – winner of a national-record 10 world and Olympic medals – appeared to be back to his familiar best as he cruised to three superiority victo-

ries in the morning session to reach the final in a new weight class. His experience seemed to tell, with his trademark underhooks still evident, and his movement, despite the visible weight gain, appearing largely unaffected. Yazdani scored through stepouts, takedowns and go-behinds in typical fashion, con-

ceding just four points across his three bouts. The Iranian great still appeared in control when he took a 2-1 lead against Buchanan at the break, but the American dominated the second period, opening with a four-point suplex. Falling behind 5-2, Yazdani

was forced to attack more aggressively, and that is where opportunities opened up for Buchanan, who scored three take-downs and two stepouts to seal a shock 13-3 victory. It was only the 10th senior-level defeat of Yazdani's career and his first loss to an American wrestler other than David

alist last year, 19-year-old Khalili outscored his opponents 42-3 across four bouts, capping an emphatic 70kg campaign with a 10-0 win over Georgia's Akaki Kemertelidze in the final. Reigning world U23 champion Azimi, meanwhile, claimed gold in the 92kg category after senior world champion Trent Hidlay – who had beaten the Iranian on criteria (5-5) in their round-robin bout – forfeited the final.

Azimi rebounded from the loss to Hidlay by edging Abolfazl Rahmani 11-9 in an all-Iranian encounter, making amends for his final defeat at last December's National Championships, before cruising past American Dustin Plott 11-0 in the semifinals.

Elsewhere across the two-day freestyle competition, Peyman Nemati settled for silver at 65kg after a 3-0 loss to Indian world U23 champion Sujeet Kalkal in the final.

Milad Valizadeh (57kg), Reza Momeni (61kg), Aliakbar Fazli (74kg), Adel Panahian (79kg), Ali Savadkouhi (86kg) and Morteza Janmohammadzadeh (130kg) added six bronze medals to Iran's tally as the country finished runner-up in the team standings with 180 points – 45 behind the United States, which topped the table with five golds, three silvers and five bronzes.

Shahrdari falls to Al Wahda in West Asia Super League

Sports Desk

Iranian champions Shahrdari Gorgan surrendered a first-quarter lead to suffer a 101-92 loss to Al Wahda SC in the FIBA West Asia Super League in Ghazir, Lebanon, on Friday.

The boost from new signing Domagoj Proleta, who impressed on his WASL debut with 30 points, seven rebounds, two assists and two steals to earn Capelli Sport Player of the Game honors.



Al Wahda guard Yousef Abdullah (2) makes an attempt during a victory over Shahrdari Gorgan at the FIBA West Asia Super League in Ghazir, Lebanon, on February 5, 2026.
● FIBA

The Syrian Basketball League outfit turned things around in the second quarter before finishing strongly to move into the win column after losing its first five outings of the season, keeping its semifinal hopes alive ahead of next month's playoffs. They did so at the expense of a side they were scheduled to face last November in Tehran, a meeting that was ultimately cancelled by league officials due to circumstances beyond basketball. Al Wahda received a major

scored 11 of his points in the second period, nearly matching Shahrdari's output by himself as he spearheaded a 28-15 run to give Al Wahda a 54-48 lead heading into halftime. Shahrdari briefly regained the lead early in the third quarter, but the momentum quickly swung back in Al Wahda's favor, with Proleta combining with Falando Jones to push the margin to 76-67 just before the end of the period. From there, Al Wahda remained in control, with James Justice Jr. and company knocking down key

shots in the closing minutes to ensure they left Ghazir with the victory secured. Jones finished with 23 points, while Justice added 23 of his own, as the new trio carried much of the scoring load, supported by

solid contributions from Bilal Atli, Yousef Abdullah and CJ Maran. Piter Girgoorian led Shahrdari with 25 points as the Iranian side failed to bounce back from last week's defeat to BC Astana in Kazakhstan, slipping to a second consecutive loss. Gorgan fell to 3-3 but remained third in the standings. Amirhossein Yazarloo chipped in with 20 points, while Jordan Hamilton recorded a double-double with 14 points and 10 rebounds for the two-time WASL runners-up.

Archaeological research launched at Sassanid Palace of Firuzabad

Iranica Desk

The first season of the comprehensive research and archaeological excavation project at the Sassanid Palace of Firuzabad, known also as Ardashir Babakan Palace, has officially begun. The project is being conducted through an integrated approach combining archaeology, historical architecture, and cultural landscape studies. It is directed by Azita Mirzaei of the Research Institute of Archaeology and is supported by the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of Fars Province, as well as the UNESCO-listed Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of the Fars Region. This research project has been designed and implemented with the aim of producing reliable and well-documented reference data, reinterpreting the architectural-ritual functions of the palace, and clarifying buried architectural structures, particularly in the northern part of the site, IRNA reported.

During this season of research, a range of modern documenta-

tion techniques and non-destructive investigation methods are being employed. These include high-precision topographic surveying, terrestrial and aerial photogrammetry using drones, and geophysical studies. In addition, targeted excavations of the architectural remains in the courtyard located opposite the northern ivan are included in the research agenda, with the objective of clarifying the building's functions and establishing its chronology.

Focusing on field data and archaeological analyses, this research seeks to reinterpret the architectural-ritual functions and the evolutionary development of the palace in relation to the Sassanid Archaeological Landscape, and can contribute to enhancing scholarly understanding of the site's position within the architectural system and settlement patterns of the Sassanid period.

This season of excavation will continue until late February, and a ten-member research and executive team is currently present on site conducting excavation op-

erations. The scientific outcomes of this season's work will be announced in due course.

The Ardashir Babakan Palace, located five kilometers from Firuzabad, is among the summer palaces of Ardashir I of the Sassanid dynasty. Built of stone and gypsum mortar, the palace is renowned for its magnificent stucco work and decorative elements in its halls, and it bears a close resemblance to the Tachara Palace, the exclusive building of Darius I at Persepolis. Qal'eh Dokhtar of Firuzabad is located six kilometers from the Firuzabad-Shiraz road. The structure, situated on the slope of a mountain overlooking the road, features refined and impressive architecture and was constructed using rubble stone, rammed gypsum, and sarooj mortar.

The Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of the Fars Region is the official designation given by UNESCO to eight Sassanid archaeological sites located in southeastern Fars Province, Iran. The property was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List on June 30, 2018.



● IRNA



● bashgahfarhangian.com

Bareh Zard Cave; hidden gem of Ilam Province

Iranica Desk

Bareh Zard Cave, one of Ilam Province's most astonishing yet lesser-known tourist attractions, is located in the highlands of Sivan Mountain along the road from Ilam to Darreh Shahr, about 35 kilometers from the main route, near Pakal village. Also called Konatarikeh Cave, it extends nearly 350 meters deep and features a maze of interconnected tunnels and chambers that captivate visitors at first sight. The cave's entrance is very narrow, requiring visitors to crawl through, but the tunnel gradually widens, making passage easier further inside. The

cave houses a variety of stalagmites and stalactites, stone columns and curtains, and a small water pool, all contributing to its natural allure, ISNA wrote. Temperatures inside remain extremely cold even during summer, so visitors are advised to bring warm clothing. The cave's chill is so intense that no living creatures can live there.

Farzad Sharifi, Director General of Ilam Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, told ISNA that the height of some chambers exceeds 12 meters. He highlighted the cave's unique formations — stalagmites of varying sizes, intricate stone

crystals, and winding passageways — which make it visually stunning.

Sharifi emphasized that Bareh Zard Cave is ancient and its formations are of great cultural and scientific significance. Visitors should enter with proper spelunking equipment and experience, as the cave contains no oxygen and no living organisms.

The cave's water pool, wide stone columns, and curtain-like formations, along with sculptural shapes formed by stalagmites and stalactites, make it a remarkable natural wonder and a must-see destination for adventurous travelers.

Qasr-e Shirin demands hundred years of digs

Iranica Desk

The head of the Preservation and Restoration Group for Historical Buildings and Sites of Kermanshah Province's Cultural Heritage Department highlighted the numerous historical artifacts from the Sassanid period located within the city of Qasr-e Shirin and stated, "This city requires the equivalent of 100 years of archaeological work to fully uncover its historical legacy."

In an interview with ISNA, Siavash Shahbazi, referring to the remarkable abundance of historical sites across Qasr-e Shirin, elaborated, "Based on the archaeological discoveries made in Qasr-e Shirin so far, this city was historically one of the principal focal points of interest for kings both in the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras."

He further added, "There are numerous historical artifacts scattered throughout Qasr-e Shirin, and if we intend to conduct comprehensive archaeological work across this entire city, many years of dedicated effort are fundamentally needed".

Noting that one of the most famous

and significant historical sites in this city is the Khosrow Palace, he stated, "As archaeologists have affirmed, this edifice was once an exceptionally magnificent structure situated within a large, royal garden."

He strongly emphasized, "To date, six distinct phases of archaeological excavation have been conducted at Khosrow Palace, which have collectively led to the discovery of a significant and substantial portion of the architectural remains of this grand structure."

Shahbazi continued, explicitly stating that this extensive historical site still requires at least three more full excavation seasons. He added, "Throughout the past several years, specific funds and budgetary allocations have been secured for the continuation of archaeological excavations at Khosrow Palace, and this year we have also strategically prioritized it for ongoing and future archaeological digs."

He specifically noted, "Following the formal allocation and release of the necessary funds, the seventh season of focused archaeological excavations at

Khosrow Palace is scheduled to commence in the coming year."

He went on to clarify the objectives, saying, "In this new and upcoming season of archaeological excavations at Khosrow Palace, archaeologists will specifically seek to find any physical traces or remnants of the vast, surrounding garden of this royal palace, the description of which is vividly recorded in various historical sources and texts."

He additionally explained, "If any verifiable traces or archaeological evidence of this illustrious garden are successfully found, we will meticulously document and record them in detail, with the ultimate aim of restoring this ancient edifice closer to the original grandeur and splendor it once possessed in antiquity."

Shahbazi further recalled, providing historical and modern context, "In past times and centuries, Qasr-e Shirin was widely regarded as a highly strategic and important geographical point by numerous kings and rulers. Today, this region is also strategically located on the main transit route for



● destinationiran.com

pilgrims visiting the holy shrines and, from another perspective, functions as an active commercial route featuring a busy border market. Therefore, given

these combined factors, it possesses significant and promising potential to develop into a major tourism hub within the province."

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Iranian tourism on display at Istanbul's EMITT 2026

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran is displaying a range of tourism destinations and cultural themes at the 29th East Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition (EMITT) 2026 in Istanbul, which concluded on February 7, according to the Touring and Automobile Club of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian pavilion, organized by the Touring and Automobile Club of Iran on behalf of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, has been operating since February 5 at the Istanbul Expo Center, one of Eurasia's most influential tourism marketplaces, IRNA reported.

On Friday, Iran's Consul General in Istanbul Ahmad Mohammadi visited the national pavilion, holding talks with exhibitors, provincial representatives, tourism companies and private-sector stakeholders.

Iran's presence features 10 private-sector companies spanning travel services, traditional accommodation and hotel reservation platforms from East Azarbaijan, Kho-

rasan Razavi, Kurdistan, Fars and Tehran provinces. The delegation represents a broad geographic and product mix aimed at reviving inbound flows and expanding regional market share.

The pavilion has focused on promoting Iran's cultural, historical and natural assets, alongside health, pilgrimage and eco-tourism offerings, sectors that Iranian officials view as commercially resilient despite external constraints.

During his visit, Mohammadi described EMITT as one of the region's most important platforms for strengthening public diplomacy, countering negative perceptions of Iran and showcasing the country's tourism capabilities, underlining the role of tourism diplomacy in enhancing cultural interaction and expanding economic relations with other countries.

Beyond destination branding, the pavilion has hosted business-to-business meetings, commercial negotiations and briefings on investment opportunities, targeting tour operators and travel intermediaries from across Eurasia. Public- and private-sector representatives have

been present throughout the exhibition to pursue partnerships and cross-border cooperation.

The consul general also praised the coordinated participation of public and private sectors in organizing the pavilion, calling it a key strength of Iran's presence at EMITT and an effective opportunity to introduce the country's diverse tourism attractions to global audiences.

The Touring and Automobile Club said the scale of participation marked Iran's strongest showing at EMITT in recent years, reflecting a coordinated push to re-engage with international tourism circuits through regional hubs. EMITT is widely regarded as the leading tourism exhibition in the Eurasian market, attracting tour operators, destination marketers and hospitality firms from dozens of countries each year.

The Iranian pavilion was formally inaugurated earlier this week by Hossein Alaei, chairman of the board and chief executive of the Touring and Automobile Club of Iran, accompanied by Iran's Cultural Attaché in Istanbul Bahram Kian.



Visitors engage with representatives at Iran's pavilion during the 29th EMITT 2026 tourism and travel exhibition in Istanbul.

● IRNA

Fajr Film Festival spotlights first-time directors in 44th edition



● IRNA

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's flagship Fajr Film Festival has become a showcase for first-time filmmakers and young directors, signaling a generational shift in the country's cinema, Mehdi Shafiei, Iran's deputy culture minister for artistic affairs, told state news agency IRNA during a visit to the festival headquarters in Tehran.

Speaking during a visit to the festival headquarters in Tehran, the main venue hosting the 44th edition, Shafiei said the current line-up stands out for the number and caliber of debut features, calling the trend "a strong indicator" for the future of Iranian cinema, IRNA reported.

He said he had watched three

to four competition titles so far and judged this year's program among the strongest of recent editions.

"The quality of first films is striking," Shafiei said, adding that the visibility granted to emerging directors at Fajr provides a solid pipeline for the national industry. "These talented filmmakers are being seen here. They form a reliable backbone for Iranian cinema, and we will see much more from them in the coming years."

The annual festival, Iran's most prominent cinematic event, has long faced criticism over limited access for debut directors. Shafiei acknowledged that many first-time filmmakers had previously been excluded but said this year's selection marked a de-

cisive change, with young directors enjoying a "prominent presence" and a higher overall standard compared with recent cycles.

He also said the breadth of strong titles across the program underscored renewed momentum in domestic film production, despite persistent financial and regulatory pressures on the sector.

Beyond cinema, Shafiei described the Fajr Film Festival, alongside the Fajr Theater Festival, as one of the region's most enduring cultural brands after 44 editions, calling its continuity a strategic asset for Iran's cultural diplomacy.

The 44th National Fajr Film Festival is running from February 1 to 11, features screenings and industry events across Tehran.

Iran-US military confrontation ...

The Chinese are certainly opposed to Washington's plans for Iran material-

izing and to the emergence of a pro-Western government in Tehran. They do not want a country like Iran, which has very close relations with China, to fall into the Western camp. From this perspective, China is willing to act at the diplomatic and political level. This is evident in the joint letters issued with Iran and Russia, warning the European side that the "snapback" or reimposition of sanctions would only worsen the situation, as well as in the joint letter sent to the International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors stating that Iran's file should now be considered normal. China is prepared to take diplomatic steps in Iran's favor, but it is not seeking to side with Iran in the event of a military confrontation with the US.

Can it be said that one of the main objectives behind the United States' intensified pressure and political cam-

paign against Iran is to target China's imports of Iranian oil, similar to what was done in the case of Venezuela?

Overall, the US has deployed all of its capabilities to prevent Iran from exporting oil to the rest of the world, including China. If this issue is framed as being exclusively about China, the analysis becomes sidetracked. For example, Washington has pursued the same approach with regard to India, South Korea, Japan, South Africa, and any other country seeking to establish oil ties with Iran. Nor can it be compared to the case of Venezuela, as the conditions in Venezuela are fundamentally different from those in Iran.

The reality is that the United States' overarching policy is to restrict—and ultimately drive to zero—Iran's oil exports, not to pressure China because of its relationship with Iran. China may also come under pressure, and in that context, Washington's proposal has been for China to purchase oil from Venezuela instead.

'The Bridge' carries its hero through narrative of war years

By Neda Mohammad Jalilehvand
Film critic

OPINION

Selecting a specific time frame from an eight-year war and shaping a screenplay around it is a time-tested approach, one that can keep the furnace of war-film production burning. "The Bridge," directed by Mohammad Asgari, is among the latest examples of this approach and is screening in the Competition Section of the 44th Fajr Film Festival.

Written by Asgari and Pedram Karimi, "The Bridge" situates its story during the days of Operation Kheibar, with the 14-kilometer Kheibar Bridge, the longest floating military bridge in the world, standing at its very core.

The film can be categorized as a character-driven screenplay, beginning and ending with Musa, a high-school student; a familiar type of hero in the canon of Iranian Sacred Defense cinema, one seen before, yet relatively effective in drawing the audience along with him.

The film opens with a solid rhythm and promptly introduces its inciting incident:

Musa heads to the southern front in order to resolve his brother Mostafa's loan problem and ease his mother's worries. The archetype of the hero's journey plays a key role in shaping and advancing the narrative, leaving a deep impact on Musa. Most crucially, it grants him agency, an element that defines his identity and plays a decisive role in forming the screenplay's first major turning point.

Musa's arrival in a war zone despite having no military training creates challenges that both propel the story forward and trigger the protagonist's inner transformation. A clear example is the very first scene of his arrival, when he finds himself standing on a suspended bridge.

The idea of introducing a childhood friend and former neighbor in the combat zone also proves to be a functional narrative device, one that demonstrates its effectiveness again in the final act. Musa's discovery of a months-old infant inside a broken, abandoned boat in the marshlands marks the first major turning point and completes a key piece of the heroic puzzle at the heart of The Bridge.

The infant can also be seen as the connective tissue between the main narrative

and the film's subplot, a link that functions seamlessly and brings the protagonist's transformation to completion.

Films like "The Bridge," which advance primarily through their central hero, have less need for subplots, though they are by no means dispensable. The story of the deaf Iraqi girl of Iranian origin, her father Abdulhai, and a brother who assists Iranian reconnaissance forces constitutes the film's most significant subplot, one that leaves a profound impact on both the narrative and its protagonist, Musa.

The theme of love also enters the screenplay in a subdued manner, casting a faint shadow over this subplot. While serviceable, it could have been developed more effectively to create a stronger contrast with the brutal and terrifying atmosphere of war.

Most of "The Bridge" secondary characters are indebted to familiar clichés and add little of substance to the film, from their exchanges of dialogue to their humor, both of which rely heavily on well-worn tropes and lack notable innovation. In contrast, Abdulhai and his daughter are rendered with a minimalist touch that fully commands the viewer's attention.

Abdulhai in particular is given a robust backstory, making him a strong example of a well-crafted supporting character. Despite possessing a screenplay that rises above the average, "The Bridge" is not without flaws, the most significant being its underdeveloped middle act, whose thinness delivers a negative jolt to the film's overall structure.

After two prior experiences in Sacred Defense cinema, Asgari demonstrates considerable technical growth in "The Bridge," having clearly moved beyond the initial infatuation with big-budget production. He succeeds in the film's dénouement and makes effective use of the southern geography across multiple shots.

"The Bridge" also features striking long shots that gain greater impact on the cinema screen and contribute effectively to the film's atmosphere. Its visually pleasing cinematography and impressive CGI are among its key strengths, significantly enriching its visual texture.

Rouhollah Zamani is age-appropriate for the role of Musa, yet the issue of his non-professional background persists. In other words, his performance relies heavily on raw emotion, with little evidence of



technique—a shortcoming that ultimately detracts from the film as a whole. By contrast, an actor like Saeed Aghakhani, in the role of Abdulhai, delivers a fully convincing performance despite heavy make-up, making effective use of body language to inhabit the character.

The article first appeared in Farsi on IRNA.