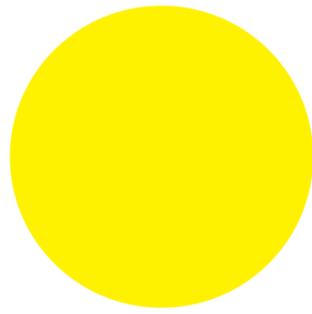


Lorestan seeks tourism lift-off through targeted projects, public engagement



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The combo photo shows from left to right Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud.



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Egypt open to restoring diplomatic ties with Iran as stabilizing force

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

Iran and Egypt have had no diplomatic relations since 1980, but in recent years, efforts have been made to restore them. The head of the Iranian Interests Section in Cairo, Mojtaba Ferdowsipour, recently said that a decision to exchange ambassadors between the two countries had already been taken and was only awaiting an official announcement. He described his



Ali Soltani-Fard

own appointment, with ambassadorial rank, as the representative of Iran's Interests Section in Egypt as proof of this. He also noted that neither Egypt nor Iran was in a hurry to move forward. Ali Soltani-Fard, an expert on Egyptian affairs, told Iran Daily that Tehran had left the path of normalization to Cairo, so it can prepare the ground for the formal reopening of embassies, but he assessed the process as positive and moving ahead. According to him, Egypt views Iran as a friendly and stabilizing country capable of shifting regional security dynamics in its favor.

IRAN DAILY: How final and irreversible do you consider this process? What are the main factors behind the delay in officially announcing the decision?

SOLTANI-FARD: Relations between Iran and Egypt have seen many ups and downs since the victory of the Islamic Revolution (1979). In different administrations, steps were taken toward normalizing ties, but for various reasons specific to each period, these efforts did not lead to normalization or, in practical terms, the reopening of embassies. However, in recent years, given the evolving regional dynamics and developments, the relationship has undergone positive changes and has continued to move forward. The issue of reopening embassies has

been on the table for the past two to three years and remains under discussion. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has repeatedly pointed out that Iran enjoys very good diplomatic relations with Egypt despite the absence of full embassy-level ties and that there is no rush. In fact, this path has been left to the Egyptians so that whenever the initial conditions are prepared on Cairo's side, the reopening of embassies can also be carried out. Therefore, this is a forward-looking process, and the two countries are clearly pursuing numerous shared interests at both regional and global levels, with regional stability and security being the most important.

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Araghchi: Fair deal attainable if Iran, US show 'creativity, flexibility'

'US has not asked for zero enrichment in talks'

Iranian FM, counterparts confer about latest negotiations

International Desk

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Iran and the United States could strike a nuclear deal if the pair demonstrated "creativity and flexibility."

"A fair and equitable deal, I believe, is achievable, but we need some creativity and flexibility by both sides, so a deal is at our reach, and there is no any other solution for this question", Araghchi said in an interview with US TV network MSNBC published on Friday.

His remarks came days after Iran and the US concluded a second round of the Oman-mediated talks in the Swiss city of Geneva, during which both sides agreed on "a set of guiding principles" to move forward in the nuclear negotiations.

During the interview, the top diplomat noted that the US side had not asked for zero enrichment – an issue that has been a major demand by Washington and a sticking point in previous talks.

"We have not offered any suspension, and the US side has not asked for zero enrichment," Araghchi said.

"What we are now talking about is how to make sure that Iran's nuclear program, including enrichment, is peaceful and would remain peaceful forever," the minister added.

His comments stand in contrast to information relayed by high-ranking US officials including President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly said Iran must not be allowed to enrich uranium at any level.

Trump, who has ordered the deployment of aircraft carriers and warships to the region, suggested on Thursday that the US would attack Iran again if Tehran does not make a deal within 10 days, which he later extended to 15.

Iran has repeatedly said that any aggression against the country would be met with a decisive response.

No military solution

Araghchi said that Iran's nuclear issue should be resolved through peaceful means, reiterating that there was no military solution to the issue.

"That has been tested last year, and there was a huge attack on our facilities. They killed and assassinated our scientists, but they couldn't kill our nuclear program. Why? Because it is developed by ourselves, by our scientists. This is a tech-



nology developed by us, belongs to us, and it cannot be destroyed by bombings, militarily'.

Araghchi said that if the US wanted to ensure that Iran's nuclear program was peaceful and would remain peaceful forever, the only solution would be a diplomatic one.

"There are both technical commitments and political commitments and technical measures to be taken in order to make sure that this program is only for peaceful purposes. We are now working on those technical questions. This is why Rafael Grossi, the director general of the IAEA, was in the recent negotiations [in Geneva]," he said.

Preparing draft of deal

The top Iranian diplomat further said the next step in talks is for him to present a draft of a possible deal to Washington "in the next two, three days."

Iran ups diplomacy

Araghchi, who has times and again contacted his counterparts from regional countries in recent weeks over tensions between Iran and the US, also made new phone calls with his Egyptian, Saudi and Russian foreign ministers to discuss the latest negotiations.

In his phone conversation with Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelaty, Araghchi underscored efforts to prepare a draft negotiating text with the US based on mutual respect.

Tehran-Cairo ties have on regional balances, and could this affect Cairo's interaction with Tel Aviv or Middle Eastern security dynamics?

Regarding relations between Egypt and Israel, it should be noted that the ties established in the 1970s under Anwar Sadat do involve political and security dimensions, but they do not mean full alignment or complete compliance with Israel in these areas. Egypt has always prioritized its own interests at different junctures. Even during the recent Gaza war, despite strong pressure from the United States to accept displaced residents from the Strip, Egypt resisted and was not willing to accept a systematic relocation of Palestinians onto its territory. Cairo has consistently placed its national and security interests first. The same equation applies to relations between Tehran and Cairo. Egypt will naturally prioritize its own national and security interests in any relationship with Iran and will push back wherever it feels its security is threatened. Egypt views Iran as a friendly and stabilizing country in the region. Given the insecurity along Egypt's borders, which undermines regional security and national interests, it is highly important for Cairo to develop ties with Tehran in order to tilt the regional security balance in its favor. Therefore, Israel is unlikely to exert a systematic or fundamental influence on the advancement of Tehran-Cairo relations, considering Egypt's security priorities.



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi is seen during an online interview with US TV network MSNBC, which was published on February 20, 2026.

IRAN'S FOREIGN MINISTRY

He also conferred the issue with his Saudi counterpart, highlighting the ongoing diplomatic efforts to address longstanding issues surrounding Iran's nuclear program. Saudi Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud expressed hope for constructive negotiations leading to a mutually acceptable outcome.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also expressed support for a fair diplomatic solution that respects Tehran's legitimate rights enshrined in the principles of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

EU offers help

Meanwhile, EU Commission spokesman Anouar El Anouni said on Friday the European Union was willing to contribute to a "meaningful" process to help break the nuclear standoff.

"We are prepared to contribute to any meaningful diplomatic process. Because, I reiterate, diplomacy must be given a chance," Anouni said at a press briefing in Brussels on Friday.

He stressed that a sustainable solution to the Iranian nuclear issue could "only be achieved through negotiations."

What political, economic, and security advantages would the full restoration of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Cairo bring for Iran?

Beyond the longstanding historical ties between the two countries, under current conditions Iran and Egypt can stand together politically and in terms of security. Given their historical importance and geopolitical weight, alongside other regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, they could help provide regional stability and curb the aggressions and excessive demands of Israel. Such actions are detrimental to all regional countries, as economic interests and development can only be achieved in a secure environment. With the development visions that countries across the region have set for themselves, they are seeking to restore stability and security to secure greater economic gains. In addition to key political and security dimensions, economic cooperation is also important. Given Egypt's historical attractions, tourism would certainly be one of the channels connecting the two countries. At one point, a tourism agreement was even signed to facilitate the exchange of tourists, although it was not fully implemented. Nevertheless, the potential and capacities exist for Iran to become a tourism destination for Egyptians and, reciprocally, for Egypt to become a major destination for Iranian travelers. Therefore, the development and full restoration of diplomatic ties could encompass all these areas.

Iran not to wage war but vows 'decisive' response to aggression: UN envoy

International Desk

The Iranian ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations stressed that the Islamic Republic will not initiate any war but will deliver a "decisive" response to an act of aggression against the country.

Amir Saeid Irvani made the remarks in a letter sent on Thursday to the UN chief and the Security Council president, one day after US President Donald Trump threatened that Washington may need to use the Indian Ocean's Diego Garcia Island, home to a joint UK-US military base, to attack Iran, Press TV reported.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly stated at the highest level that it neither seeks tension nor war, and will not initiate any war," he said. "However, in the event that it is subjected to military aggression, Iran will respond decisively and proportionately in the exercise of its inherent right of self-defense under Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations."

He also noted that in case of any military aggression against Iran, all regional bases, facilities, and assets belonging to the "hostile force" would constitute "legitimate targets" for Iran's retaliatory operations.



Amir Saeid Irvani
AFP

The United States, Irvani warned, would bear responsibility for any "unpredictable and uncontrolled" consequences. He further denounced Trump's threats to use force against Iran as a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and international law that risks plunging the entire region into a new cycle of crisis and instability.

"Given the volatile situation in the region and the persistent movement and build-up of military equipment and assets by the United States, such a belligerent statement by the President of the United States must not be treated as mere rhetoric, it signals a real risk of military aggression, the consequences of which would be catastrophic for the region and would constitute a grave threat to international peace and security," he added.

Meanwhile, the Iranian envoy emphasized that the country remains fully committed to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and to diplo-

matic solutions. He highlighted Tehran's engagement in recent indirect nuclear talks with Washington in Geneva aimed at lifting unlawful US sanctions and addressing ambiguities regarding Iran's peaceful nuclear program.

Irvani also said that a durable and balanced solution can be achieved if the United States, like Iran, approaches nuclear talks with "seriousness and sincerity and demonstrate genuine respect for the UN Charter and international law."

Trump began to threaten military action against Iran after recent economic protests in the country, which were quickly hijacked by foreign-backed rioters.

Since then, the United States has dispatched a number of warships to regional waters near Iran, prompting authorities in Tehran to warn that even a single shot fired at the country would be met with a far-reaching and massive response.

Iran elected vice-chair of UN Special Committee on Charter

Iran has been elected as vice-chair of the United Nations Special Committee on the Charter and a member of the bureau of the committee.

The decision was made during a meeting held at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York. The Islamic Republic of Iran will serve as Vice-Chair of the United Nations Special Committee on the Charter, in addition to holding a seat on its bureau.

Established in 1974 within the framework of the United Nations, the Special Committee on the Charter plays a direct and significant role in matters related to the UN Charter.

Its mandate includes examining proposals aimed at enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the United Nations in accordance with the principles and provi-

sions of the Charter.

Among the committee's key responsibilities are addressing issues related to the maintenance of international peace and security, promoting the peaceful settlement of disputes, and strengthening the development and application of international law.

At a time when the international order based on the UN Charter faces serious challenges and unprecedented violations of its principles, the Special Committee serves as a legal platform to uphold the sovereign equality of states, the prohibition of the use of force, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The committee is regarded as playing a vital role in reinforcing the rule of law and preserving the credibility of the international legal system.

Egypt open to ...

What domestic or regional obstacles could challenge the normalization process, and how can the two countries manage them?

Challenges have always existed in the region across various issues, and several files are currently under discussion between the two sides. The most important one is Gaza and Palestine. In addition, other regional and international matters play a role, including evolving regional developments, particularly the aggressions carried out by the United States and Israel against Iranian territory, as well as other dynamics taking shape, as in Syria and Sudan. Nevertheless, shared interests do exist between the two countries. Despite these obstacles, the positions adopted by both sides have been constructive and forward-looking. The talks taking place between the two foreign ministries have been positive, and contacts continue on a regular basis. Araghchi has even held consultations with his Egyptian counterpart regarding the negotiations currently taking shape between Iran and the United States. Furthermore, discussions also took place with officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency in Egypt. This demonstrates that despite regional issues, Egypt has also stood alongside Iran on broader international matters and has adopted positive positions.

Given Egypt's peace agreement with Israel, what impact would closer

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

CARTOON



Mohsen Paknejad
SHANA

US energy cooperation 'possible' amid nuclear talks: Oil minister

Economy Desk

Iran's Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad said on Friday that cooperation between Iran and the United States in the oil and gas sector is possible as nuclear negotiations continue. "Everything is possible," Paknejad said when asked about the likelihood of collaboration between Tehran and Washington in the energy field. According to a report by Tas-

nim news agency, the minister noted that it remains uncertain whether such cooperation would be implemented immediately. "It is not clear whether Tehran-Washington oil and gas cooperation will become operational now or not," he said. Hamid Qanbari, deputy for economic diplomacy at Iran's Foreign Ministry, previously outlined the scope of discussions during a meeting at the Iran Chamber of Commerce.

"Common interests in oil and gas fields, shared fields, mining investments, and even buying airplanes are included in the text of negotiations with the United States," Qanbari said on Sunday. Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on Tuesday that Tehran and Washington agreed on "a set of guiding principles" to move forward in nuclear negotiations after the two sides concluded a second

round of talks in Geneva. The United States, which has deployed aircraft carriers and warships to the region, has threatened Iran with military action if no agreement is reached. Iran has declared its conditions and vowed not to bow to what it calls excessive demands, including the US push for zero uranium enrichment. Tehran has also said it will respond forcefully to any aggression.

TPO: Non-oil exports to Qatar rise as trade balance turns positive

Economy Desk

Iran's non-oil exports to Qatar rose significantly in the first 10 months of the current Iranian year while imports declined, shifting the bilateral trade balance in Tehran's favor, a senior official at Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPO) said. Abdolamir Rabihavi, director general of the TPO's West Asia Office, announced details of trade exchanges between Iran and Qatar for the 10-month period, reporting growth in exports and an improved trade balance. According to IRNA on Thursday, in the first 10 months of the Iranian calendar year beginning March 21, Iran's non-oil exports to Qatar increased in both weight and value compared with the same period last year, reaching about 580,000 tons worth more than \$122 million. "Last year during the same period, 432,000 tons of goods worth \$113 million were exported to Qatar, which shows that Iran's exports to Qatar have increased by about

34% in weight and about 8% in value," Rabihavi said. "Review of exported goods shows that the bulk of Iran's exports still includes agricultural products, foodstuffs, construction materials and some mineral items," he added. "Items such as eggs, tomatoes, watermelon, industrial powdered milk, flooring, dried fruits, cement, clinker and construction stones have a significant share of the export basket, indicating Iran's role in supplying part of Qatar's import needs."

Imports from Qatar decline As for the imports, Rabihavi said, "Iran's imports from Qatar in the first 10 months of the current year have been lower in volume and value compared to exports." "Total imports from Qatar in this period are estimated at about 101,000 tons worth approximately \$111 million; while this figure was 145,000 tons worth \$175 million in the same period last year." "Imports from Qatar have decreased by about 30% in weight and about 37% in value," he noted.

He said imported items have included industrial raw materials, animal and poultry feed, industrial parts and equipment, and chemical materials, indicating that Qatar mostly acts as a re-export hub for certain goods and its share in Iran's import supply chain is not very high. Rabihavi said Iran's trade balance with Qatar in the first 10 months of this year was positive and in Iran's favor, adding that the surplus is estimated at about \$11 million, while in the same period last year the balance was negative at about \$62 million to Iran's detriment. "The volume of indirect trade between the two countries is conducted through third countries such as the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates," he said. "Goods such as iron and steel billets and bitumen are transferred through these routes; trade in these items is estimated at about \$200 million, which indicates hidden and expandable capacities in trade relations between Tehran and Doha."



IRNA

Russia casts completion of Bushehr units 2, 3 as priority despite challenges

Economy Desk

Russia's Rosatom said on Thursday that construction of units 2 and 3 at Iran's Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant will remain a priority and will be completed successfully despite ongoing challenges. Director General Alexey Likhachev told reporters that building the additional units at the plant in Iran would stay on the company's priority list and that the project would be completed successfully sooner or later. Iran's only operating nuclear power plant, built by Russia in the southern province of Bushehr, was first connected to the national electricity grid on September 3, 2011, and entered commercial operation in September 2013. The reactor has a net generating capacity of about 915 megawatts, or roughly 1,000 MW. Meanwhile, Russia's Energy Minister Sergei Tsivilov said Wednesday at a press conference on the final day of the 19th Joint Commission on Economic and Trade Cooperation between the two countries that Russia is "seriously cooperating with the Iranian government and has many projects in various locations; currently, units 2 and 3 of the Bushehr nuclear power plant are under construction." "Besides units 2 and 3 of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, we are examining new plant

A view of Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in southern Bushehr Province
IRNA

units," Tsivilov added. Mohammad Eslami, vice president and head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said during a visit last Saturday to the construction site in Bushehr that cumulative physical progress on the project has reached 18%. He added that design, engineering and equipment manufacturing in workshops, as well as executive operations at the project site, are currently being carried out simultaneously. He noted that about 5,600 personnel from Iranian contractors are actively working at the site and expressed hope that, based on the revised schedule, the units would be commissioned in phases in the first year following completion of Iran's Seventh Development Plan. Each of units 2 and 3 is being

built with a generation capacity of 1,057 megawatts of electricity. Separately, according to IRNA, citing TASS, Likhachev said on Thursday that Rosatom has also developed plans to strengthen security at the Bushehr nuclear power plant in response to rising regional tensions. He said that, with confidence and based on results, it could be stated that following negotiations by Russian President Vladimir Putin with world leaders, the plant was one of the safest locations during the Israeli-imposed 12-day war against Iran. He added that although some workers — particularly family members and children — were evacuated from the site, similar contingency plans had been prepared in advance.

Chamber head pushes for direct trade with Riyadh, floats joint initiatives

Economy Desk

Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture chief Samad Hassanzadeh called for establishing direct trade relations with Saudi Arabia, proposing reciprocal trade delegations and a dedicated Iranian exhibition in the kingdom. According to ILNA on Friday, Hassanzadeh made the remarks during a meeting with Sheikh Saleh Kamel, president of the Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry and head of the Federation of Saudi Chambers of Com-

merce, on the sidelines of the 41st General Assembly of the Islamic Chamber in Mecca. Hassanzadeh pointed to the current indirect trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia and urged replacing it with direct commercial exchanges. He highlighted Iran's capabilities in the food industry, noting that Iranian products are exported to various countries worldwide based on global standards. "At present, Iran does not have direct trade with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, we request that the groundwork for direct exchanges between the two countries be fa-

cilitated," Hassanzadeh said. Referring to past trade routes, he suggested enabling Iranian products to reach Saudi Arabia via Dammam Port, the nearest maritime route for bilateral commerce. Hassanzadeh also proposed organizing a dedicated exhibition to showcase Iran's commercial capacities in Saudi Arabia, timed to coincide with the dispatch of a Saudi trade delegation to Iran. He invited Kamel to visit Iran to familiarize himself with available business opportunities and recommended that a Saudi trade delegation travel to Iran.



In response, Kamel welcomed the proposals put forward by the Iranian chamber chief, emphasizing that establishing direct trade be-

tween Iran and Saudi Arabia is an important matter that he would raise and follow up with senior officials in his country.

Hassanzadeh also welcomed the proposal for exchanging trade delegations and holding a dedicated Iranian exhibition in Saudi Arabia, describing it as an opportunity to facilitate bilateral negotiations between economic actors from both countries. Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture chief Samad Hassanzadeh (R) meets Sheikh Saleh Kamel, president of the Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry and head of the Federation of Saudi Chambers of Commerce, in Mecca on February 19, 2026.

Dispatch from Munich

Future of transatlantic relations



By Michael Froman

President of the Council on Foreign Relations

O P I N I O N

Between February 13–15, I joined heads of state, foreign ministers, military officers, intelligence officials, businesspeople, journalists, and foreign policy scholars in Bavaria for the 62nd Munich Security Conference (MSC). Rather than wait, I thought I'd share some early impressions.

Security is the operative word at this confab. There are special entrances and exits to conference halls for the considerable number of participants who carry firearms. Balaclava-clad snipers man the local rooftops. Police helicopters regularly circle overhead, and one is occasionally cut off — or brushed aside — by hulking security guards who surround key leaders like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the modern equivalent of a Roman phalanx, working its way through the narrow hallways of the Hotel Bayerischer Hof.

I have yet to find another venue where generals from The Gambia, lawyers from The Hague, and CEOs from Silicon Valley sit shoulder to shoulder, without batting an eye. Indeed, when I went to watch the Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez make her MSC debut, the seats in front of me were packed with young German military officers, eager to hear from the congresswoman. I even witnessed a prominent European minister and an African businessman smoking old-school billiard tobacco pipes between meetings. It reminded me of poking my head into my father's smelly study when I was a kid.

The tight security and colorful cast of characters somewhat belie the wonkish programming: roundtables, town halls, tabletop exercises, and policy speeches. But the start of this year's conference was profoundly tense. Thousands of attendees, many of them avowed transatlanticists, waited with bated breath inside the crammed halls of the Hotel Bayerischer Hof for US Secretary of State Marco Rubio to deliver his address. Would it emphasize a recalibration but reaffirmation of NATO or another step toward a transatlantic divorce?

Many of my European friends fretted that Rubio would deliver a fiery polemic like JD Vance last year and permanently rupture the transatlantic alliance. Then, on Valentine's Day, the clouds parted, and Rubio delivered a bouquet of flowers, albeit with a few thorns, instead. By the next day, those same friends were asking themselves whether Europe would be lulled back into a sense of complacency by Rubio's lack of venom.

That Rubio's speech was met with a robust standing ovation from European and world leaders was noteworthy, given his reference to some of the same concerns the administration has expressed about the state of European civilization. One German business leader described his address as a redux of Vance's controversial remarks at last year's MSC, only written in the tone of a Hallmark card.

Rubio did not pull his punches. He made clear that the United States expects Europe to take principal responsibility for the conventional defense of the continent sooner rather than later. He further lambasted the "broken status quo," the "pursuit of a world without borders," and the "dogmatic vision of free and unfettered trade" that caused "deindustrialization" and "stripped our nations of their wealth." So why the big sigh of relief?



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (C) talks with German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl (L) and France's Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Noël Barrot (R) at the Munich Security Conference, Germany, on February 14, 2026.
● GIUSEPPE LAMI/EPA

What comforted worried attendees was the undertone of the secretary's remarks. Rubio cast the Trump administration's myriad frustrations with Europe as tough love — as exercising the United States' duty of care toward an ally it was bound to and could never give up on. As Rubio proclaimed, "our destiny is and will always be intertwined with yours because we know that the fate of Europe will never be irrelevant to our own." He added, "In a time of headlines heralding the end of the transatlantic era, let it be known and clear to all that this is neither our goal nor our wish — because for us Americans, our home may be in the Western Hemisphere, but we will always be a child of Europe." Message: "We care deeply."

That language is reminiscent of the rhetoric used by every administration since WWII. In other words, the family would stay together — but require expensive therapy, for which Europe must foot the bill.

Rubio's colleague, US Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby, revealed in his remarks at the conference, that — having experienced the "near-death" experience of NATO — Europe was finally moving from a world in which it depended blindly on the collective security provisions of NATO's Article V to a world defined by the individual responsibility of Article III. That is, the obligation of each NATO member state to "maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." Hence, the Trump administration's call for "allies who can defend themselves so that no adversary will ever be tempted to test our collective strength".

Whether Europe will actually under-

take the reforms that both it and the United States proclaim are urgently needed is another question. If I had a euro for every time European leaders vowed to complete the European project and achieve strategic autonomy, well, I could buy a lot of Bavarian pretzels.

But, at least, the Europeans were singing the right tune that weekend, and with renewed vigor. On the main stage, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that "Europe has to learn to become a geopolitical power," and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz stated an end to Europe's "vacation from history".

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Macron, Merz, and others are increasingly championing a shared vision for a strong Europe capable of defending itself; an economically and technologically vibrant Europe capable of competing globally; and an independent Europe, free from hegemonic designs of Russia, China, and even the United States, and able to build distinct relationships with other powers, such as India.

In Munich, these ambitions were accompanied by striking proposals: a joint French-British-German nuclear deterrent for Europe; a "two-speed" European Commission designed to circumvent bureaucratic inertia and the politics of consensus; a revitalized European defense industrial base equipped with precision deep-strike capabilities and next-generation fighter aircraft; a bloc-wide capital markets union; sovereign cloud and AI capabilities; and more.

But most of these proposals are not new, and the political and structural

barriers to achieving these goals cannot be understated.

We should also remember that Europe is not out of the woods with respect to the Trump administration's grievances. Trump has yet to announce any withdrawal of US forces from the continent, but that is assumed to be coming. A diplomatic storm is brewing over Europe's stringent regulatory approach toward American technology companies. Domestic elections in France and Germany could attract unwanted attention — or intervention — from the president. And differences remain on both sides of the Atlantic on questions of free speech, migration, and trade.

There is no surefire method, besides time, to rebuild transatlantic trust after President Trump threatened to violate the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark in his pursuit of Greenland. I was grateful that, unlike in Davos, Greenland did not suck up all the oxygen in Munich, but I cannot overstate the degree to which this episode continues to loom large in the perceptions of Europeans as to whether the United States is a reliable partner, even after Rubio's speech.

Then, there is Ukraine. At the conference, Western intelligence and military officials revealed their latest estimate of Russian casualties: 65,000 over the course of December and January. That's about 1,000 per day. The Russians are not winning the conflict, which has now lasted longer than the Great Patriotic War and resulted only in Russian control of an incremental 12 percent of Ukraine since the full-scale attack. Russia stands little chance of winning the war and achieving their maximalist territorial, political, and military objectives.

The trouble, however, is that Ukraine and its Western allies have no coherent strategy for winning the war either. In practice, our current strategy is to hope that Putin will eventually give up his imperialist ambitions and seek a reasonable settlement. The casualty count means Putin might finally have to start conscripting men from Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Russian economy continues to deteriorate. Perhaps these factors will lead to a change in the politics back home, but given Russian history, we should probably not underestimate Russians' tolerance for pain.

The United States wants to negotiate peace now — or, in the words of US Ambassador to NATO Matthew Whitaker, to fight until negotiations are impossible — which raises the question what happens then. Thus far, the current administration is unwilling to



German soldiers pose in front of a tank during Iron Wolf military exercises with NATO forces and partners on May 16, 2025, at the Gaizunai training area near Rukla, Lithuania.
● GETTY IMAGES



Rubio did not pull his punches. He made clear that the United States expects Europe to take principal responsibility for the conventional defense of the continent sooner rather than later. He further lambasted the "broken status quo," the "pursuit of a world without borders," and the "dogmatic vision of free and unfettered trade" that caused "deindustrialization" and "stripped our nations of their wealth." So why the big sigh of relief?

provide Ukraine with the material support required to change the correlation of forces on the ground and force Putin's hand.

The Europeans would like to take a more aggressive approach to supporting Ukraine, but they lack the capabilities themselves to do so. European leaders, including Macron, also proclaimed at MSC that they must play an integral role in securing any eventual peace in Ukraine, including with respect to security guarantees. But, as Zelenskyy made clear, Russia has little respect for Europe. So, Europe might not be in the room where it happens but ultimately has to pay for and secure whatever is negotiated there.

Finally, there is the China question, which was the source of much debate. Will Europe derisk from the United States by pursuing more robust ties with Beijing, particularly on trade and technology? European leaders, including Merz and Macron, have certainly feinted in this direction, with the former set to lead Germany's largest-ever delegation — including a record number of German CEOs — to the Middle Kingdom next week. But I am dubious that the right response to being wary of the United States is to ignore the facts underlying the challenge China poses to Europe's manufacturing and, with China's active support of Russia's war



President Emmanuel Macron of France (L), Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany (C), and Prime Minister Keir Starmer of Britain talk to photographers at the Munich Security Conference, Germany, on February 13, 2026.

outmaneuver the United States in Munich. Instead of deepening transatlantic fissures by laying out a concrete framework for cooperation with Europe and positioning China as the more "stable" superpower, Wang's mainstage appearance will be remembered for his fiery rebuke of Japan's new prime minister. Japan, Wang said, "has lingering ambitions for invasion and colonialism of Taiwan, and the ghosts of militarism are still haunting the country". It felt like a reprise of wolf warrior diplomacy.

To end on an optimistic note, I found myself in several discussions about what concretely could be done over the next year to make progress on this array of challenges. One issue came up repeatedly: cooperation between the United States, Europe, and others in pursuing innovative ways to reduce dependence on China for critical minerals.

President Obama had a sign on the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office that read, "Hard Things Are Hard." Making progress on any number of these hard issues — from reforming Europe to securing Ukraine to reducing dependence on China — could create some much-needed confidence and momentum in Europe.

The article was first published by the Council on Foreign Relations.

President Emmanuel Macron of France (L), Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany (C), and Prime Minister Keir Starmer of Britain talk to photographers at the Munich Security Conference, Germany, on February 13, 2026.

KAY NIETTFELD/REUTERS

West vs West at Munich Security Conference



By Bronwen Maddox

Director and chief executive of Chatham House

OPINION

Half the hall in Munich gave US Secretary of State Marco Rubio a standing ovation following his speech — out of relief at his declaration that "the fate of Europe will never be irrelevant to our own". This, at least, was not another fight picked by the Trump administration with its NATO allies.

But there was immediate unease too, at the explicit limits Rubio placed on American support for Europe and Ukraine. And non-European countries were furious at what they saw as a tribute to white European civilization and a call to protect it from the rest of the world.

Rubio was followed by Wang Yi, Beijing's top diplomat, who deployed stately phrases to describe China's rivalry with the US, before erupting into a verbal fusillade against Japan, for its temerity to support Taiwan.

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer freshened up his "friends with all sides" diplomatic pitch; the US is still "an indispensable ally". But he would now like more trade and defence deals with Europe too. The UK would deploy its carrier strike group to the Arctic soon "as part of our commitment to Euro-Atlantic security," he promised his security-minded audience.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rounded off the morning, reminding his audience that the four-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale attack on his country is fast approaching. He was more overtly appreciative of European contributions to his country's war effort than at Davos three weeks ago, but just as urgent in calling on the US to send more missile defences and press Russia for concessions.

The elephant

That line-up on the second day of the Munich Security Conference captures the uneasy state of the world. Countries are trying to position themselves safely and profitably between two superpowers that are in rising economic conflict but not at war — at least, not yet.

But the conference focus, on the theme "Under Destruction," has been the rift between the US and its former allies,



DAVID PARKINS/ASPENIA ONLINE

captured in the title of one event I was moderating: "The West vs the West".

Delegates were invited to address the "elephant in the room"; screens around the halls and corridors showed a lumbering elephant heading for the viewer (with a resemblance, intended or not, to the Republican Party symbol). And they were given Lego models of an elephant to assemble.

The Munich conference is the logical place to begin to discuss the Atlantic rift. It was here a year ago that US Vice President JD Vance shocked European leaders by stating the greatest threat to

Europe was not from Russia, but "from within".

The Rubio speech marked a deliberate contrast to Vance's broadside at European cultural decline. But there was a clear warning that the Trump administration would go its own way in pursuit of US interests if it did not find Europe sympathetic. "It is our preference to do it together with you," said Rubio, but the US would not wait around to wrestle diplomatic agreement from reluctant allies.

The secretary of state offered scathing words for the United Nations, which

"has no answers and has played virtually no role" in Gaza and Ukraine. There was a now-familiar attack on migration as an "urgent threat to the fabric of our societies and the survival of our culture".

Most surprise — and controversy — flowed from his paean to European civilisation. Europe gave the world the rules of law, universities, science, Beethoven, and the Beatles, he said. No, we had our own civilisation millennia ago, was the retort from other continents.

The UK prime minister has perfected his bid to be on good terms with all sides — at least for audiences outside the UK — even when the rival representatives for his petition are in the same room.

The pitch to the EU, however, represents a concerted attempt behind the scenes to improve the terms on which the UK deals with trade and, if possible, another attempt to enter the arrangements on joint defence procurement.

This was then a more diplomatic gathering on the surface than last year, when the German defence minister shouted out loud in the hall, "What are you saying?" during the vice-president's speech. But the tensions are clear and explicit. The elephant is not only in the centre of the hall but trumpeting loudly.

The article was first published by Chatham House.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio leaves after speaking at the Munich Security Conference on February 14, 2026.

ALEX BRANDON/AFP



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Head coach Manolopoulos extends Iran contract until 2028



Sports Desk

Sotiris Manolopoulos has committed his future to Iran's national basketball team through 2028, the Iranian Basket-

ball Federation announced on Thursday.

The 55-year-old Greek tactician, who previously coached Panathinaikos B.C. and AEK Athens B.C. in his homeland, as

well as Romania's CS Dinamo București, took charge of Iran in August 2024.

He guided Team Melli to a third-place finish at the FIBA Asia Cup in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, last August – the coun-

try's first podium appearance at the tournament since 2017.

Iran swept all three of its Group B games, topping a pool that included Japan, Guam and Syria, before mounting a dramatic comeback to edge Chinese Taipei 78-75 in the quarterfinals. A heavy 92-48 semifinal defeat to eventual champion Australia halted Iran's title bid, but the West Asian powerhouse rebounded to defeat New Zealand 79-73 in the bronze-medal game.

Turning his focus to the next challenge, Manolopoulos has named a 15-man squad for the upcoming double-header against Jordan and Syria in Group C of the Asian qualifiers for the 2027 FIBA Basketball World Cup.

Top spot in the group will be on the line when Iran faces Jordan on neutral court at the Nouhad Nawfal Sports Complex in Zouk Mikael, Lebanon, on Friday. Both sides opened their qualifying campaigns in December with perfect 2-0 records, defeating Iraq and Syria, respectively.

The matchup will mark their first meeting since the 2022 Asia Cup quarterfinals, where Jordan claimed a 91-76 victory to extend its head-to-head advantage to 6-2. The Falcons will be seeking a third consecutive win in the current qualifying cycle.

Iran will also stage its designated home fixture against Syria in Zouk Mikael on March 2.

Iran got off to an emphatic start in the

qualifiers, draining a remarkable 19 three-pointers to defeat Iraq 94-68 in its group opener in Zouk Mikael – led by Sina Vahedi's 21 points – before Piter Girgoorian contributed a game-high 21 points – including 12 from behind the arc – to lead Iran to a 86-71 win in the second outing.

Under the qualification format, the top three teams from each of the four first-round groups will progress to the second round. The 12 advancing teams will be divided into two groups – with Group A paired with Group C, and Group B with Group D – carrying forward results against fellow qualifiers. The top three teams from each second-round group, along with the best fourth-placed side, will secure spots at the 2027 World Cup in Qatar.

The following is Iran's 15-man squad for the upcoming games in World Cup qualifiers:

Arsalan Kazemi (Esteghlal), Arman Zanganeh (Palayesh Naft Abadan), Sina Vahedi (Meralco Bolts), Salar Monji (Al Sulaibikhat), Mobin Sheikhi (Shahrdari Gorgan), Matin Aqajanpour (Kaleh Mazandaran), Piter Girgoorian (Shahrdari Gorgan), Seyyed Mahdi Jafari (Esteghlal), Mohammad-Mahdi Heidari (Esteghlal), Hassan Aliakbari (Esteghlal), Amirhossein Azari (Tabiat Eslamshahr), Seyyed Mohammad Qafari (Tabiat Eslamshahr), Alireza Sharifi (Esteghlal), Mohammad-Basir Momeni (Petro Novin Mahshahr), Mohammad-Mahdi Rahimi (Esteghlal).

Heavyweight prodigy Yousefi makes commanding comeback to stage

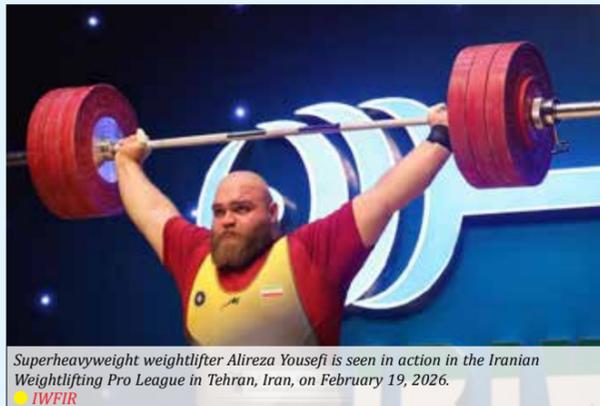
Sports Desk

Iranian weightlifting star Alireza Yousefi marked his return to competition in emphatic fashion on Thursday, capturing the superheavyweight title at the Iranian Weightlifting Pro League.

Representing Foolad Mobarakeh, the 22-year-old prodigy, who had been sidelined for 14 months following knee surgery, totaled 430kg to secure the top spot in the +110kg division.

Yousefi opened with a 188kg lift in the snatch and sealed the title with a commanding 242kg effort in the clean and jerk, underlining his return to form after more than a year away from the platform.

The appearance marked his first competition since his breakthrough performance at the World Championships in



Superheavyweight weightlifter Alireza Yousefi is seen in action in the Iranian Weightlifting Pro League in Tehran, Iran, on February 19, 2026.

December 2024. In Manama, Yousefi stunned compatriot Alireza Davoudi and Armenian Olympic silver medalist Varzadat Lalayan to claim clean and jerk gold with a continental record lift of 262kg. He went on to secure bronze in the total with 456kg.

Reza Hassanpour finished runner-up on Thursday with a total of 407kg. The former world junior silver medalist trailed Yousefi by just one kilogram in the snatch but was unable to surpass 220kg in the clean and jerk after sustaining an injury. **Hamidreza Mohammad-**

di-Tanha, a triple Asian junior silver medalist in 2024, placed third with lifts of 177kg in the snatch and 212kg in the clean and jerk for a combined 389kg. A two-time world junior champion, Yousefi will now look to translate his statement victory into selection for Iran's national team ahead of a busy 2026 calendar. However, competition for a place in the superheavyweight squad remains fierce, with Davoudi and reigning Asian champion Ayat Sharifi among the leading contenders.

Iran's first major assignment of the year will be the Asian Championships in April in Ahmedabad, India. The Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in September and the IWF World Championships in October in Ningbo, China, are also looming on the international schedule.

Sa Pinto to stay on as Esteghlal coach despite ACL Two exit: Report



Sports Desk

Portuguese head coach Ricardo Sa Pinto is set to remain in charge of Esteghlal despite the club's elimination from the AFC Champions League Two round of 16, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA).

The Tehran-based side conceded two late goals in a 3-2 defeat to Jordanian champion Al Hussein in Amman on Tuesday, crashing out 4-2 on aggregate in the first knockout round of Asia's second-tier club competition.

The loss fueled intense speculation in Iranian media over Sa Pinto's future, with former Esteghlal coaches Javad Nekounam and Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh among the names linked to a potential return. Questions had mounted amid inconsistent domestic and continental campaigns.

However, IRNA reported Friday that the club's board has opted for continuity, particularly with fixtures

coming in quick succession, after talks with Iranian candidates reportedly reached a deadlock in recent days.

Sa Pinto began his second spell in charge last summer. During his previous stint in the 2022/23 season, he guided Esteghlal to a third-place league finish and the final of the Hazfi Cup, where the Blues fell 2-1 to archrival Persepolis. Esteghlal currently sits third in the Persian Gulf Pro League standings with 35 points from 20 matches – one point behind leader Golgozar Sirjan, which has played a game more, and level with Tractor in second. The Capital Blues travel to face bottom-placed Mes Rafsanjan on Sunday, a match that will also mark a reunion with former coach Mojtaba Jabbari, who led the club to domestic cup success last season.

Esteghlal remains in contention for a second successive Hazfi Cup title and is set to meet Khaybar Khorramabad in the quarterfinals.

Singapore Smash 2026:

Faraji crashes out in first round



Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis prospect Benjamin Faraji bowed out in the opening round of the men's singles qualifiers at the WTT Singapore Smash on Thursday, falling 3-2 to India's Akash Pal.

Faraji, who captured a historic under-15 bronze medal at the 2024 ITTF World Youth Championships, made a bright start by taking the opening game 11-8. However, Pal responded by claiming the next two games 13-11 and 11-7 to seize control of the match.

The Iranian teenager rallied to level the contest with an 11-6 win in the fourth game, forcing a decider. But Pal – ranked No. 106 in the world – held his nerve to seal the fifth game 11-7 and close out the 43-minute encounter. With \$1.55 million in prize money at stake, the Singapore Smash main draw boasts a star-studded field. Among the leading contenders are world No. 1 Wang Chuqin of China, Brazil's world No. 2 Hugo Calderano, and China's Lin Shidong, who is ranked third in the latest ITTF World Rankings.

Abu Musa set to host cruise ship under new tourism plan



● MEHR

Iranica Desk

The governor of Abu Musa, Hormozgan Province, announced plans to establish a maritime route for a leisure cruise vessel to the island, describing

the move as an effective step toward revitalizing maritime tourism and promoting economic development on Abu Musa and other strategic islands.

Speaking to IRNA, Ahmad Bana-

fi said that following months of joint meetings with the private sector, the necessary agreements have been reached to deploy a cruise ship aimed at developing maritime tourism in the Persian Gulf, with a focus

procedures and the issuance of required permits are currently underway, noting that the vessel's first trial voyage is expected to take place before March 21, sailing from Bushehr to Abu Musa and Kish.

Banafi said that following the trial voyage, planning will be finalized to schedule at least one weekly trip to Abu Musa. He emphasized that developing tourism on the island and its surrounding islands is a key priority for local officials and is being pursued with determination.

Referring to the ship's technical and hospitality capabilities, the governor said the vessel is equipped with hotel-style accommodations and standard passenger services, enabling it to play an important role in showcasing Abu Musa's natural attractions and expanding maritime tourism in the region.



● IRNA

on Abu Musa, IRNA wrote.

He added that administrative

He noted that the ship is fitted with two ramps at the bow and

stern, giving it a special roll-on/roll-off cargo-passenger function. This allows freight trucks to drive onto the vessel under their own power at the departure port and disembark the same way at the destination.

According to Banafi, the vessel is 145 meters long and powered by four engines with a combined output of 27,560 kilowatts, enabling a cruising speed of 24 knots.

Highlighting its passenger capacity, he said the ship can carry up to 1,700 passengers across five different classes, ranging from economy seating using shared public spaces to luxury cabins with direct sea views. In total, 250 cabins with more than 581 beds are distributed across multiple decks and categorized according to service level and location.

He added that the ship's second and third decks are designed to accommodate up to 700 passenger vehicles, a capacity expected to significantly facilitate maritime transport and strengthen trade and tourism exchanges involving Abu Musa.

The city of Abu Musa comprises five inhabited islands and one uninhabited island, with Abu Musa Island serving as the administrative center. The island is located approximately 220 kilometers from Bandar Abbas, the capital of Hormozgan Province.

Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari prepares to host Nowruz travelers

Iranica Desk

More than 800 tourist attractions, including 108 natural sites, 674 cultural and historical attractions, eight man-made landmarks, 12 nationally designated tourism target villages, 15 government-approved exemplary tourism area are ready to welcome Nowruz (Iranian New Year) travelers to Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, widely known as the "Roof of Iran."

Hadi Qasemi Nafchi, deputy head of the province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, said all accommodation facilities under the supervision of the organization — including hotels, apartment hotels, guesthouses, licensed private lodgings, eco-lodges and other units — have been fully prepared to host Nowruz travelers, according to chtn.ir.

He added that during the Nowruz holidays, priority accommodation will be given to licensed facilities operating under the supervision of the provincial cultural heritage, tourism and handicrafts Organization.

Qasemi said the organization is making every effort to ensure pleasant and memorable experiences for visitors during the holiday period.

Referring to the province's natural assets, he noted that the oak forests of the Zagros region — particularly those in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari — rank among the area's most significant tourist attractions. He stressed that the forests are a valuable asset, especially for tourism, and require effective measures for protection and expansion.

Qasemi further emphasized that tourism development plays a key role in job creation, reducing unemployment, stimulating economic growth and improving local livelihoods.



● google.com

Riab blends ancient wisdom with modern desert technologies

Iranica Desk

Gonabad, located in the arid climate of Khorasan Razavi Province, has long been defined as a resilient and dynamic historical landscape — one whose 5,000-year-old civilization is attested not only by oral history, but also by written records and monumental structures.

In the current era, the prevailing management approach is based on the principle of transforming valuable tangible and intangible heritage from a purely historical collection into a driving force for sustainable development. This modern perspective in Gonabad's urban management, particularly in the historic area of Riab village, has created a rare convergence between ancient heritage and forward-looking technological planning. Situated on the edge of the desert and shaped atop millennia of civilization, Riab is today emerging as a model for integrating intelligent desert architecture with living cultural heritage. Its adobe structures, windcatchers, and complex qanat systems are not only core elements of the region's historical identity, but also serve as inspiration for modern technologies in energy management, climate adaptation, and water resource optimization, according to ISNA.

Today, Riab has become a forum for dialogue between a wise past and a technology-driven future — a settlement rooted in soil and wind, yet oriented toward the horizon ahead. Continued research efforts, cultural investment, and the empowerment of the local community can help realize the vision of transforming Riab into a national symbol of intelligent Iranian desert architecture and a shining example of heritage-innovation integration, where thousands of years of desert living inform new ways of life in the 21st century.



● kojara.com

Sheltered by the grandeur of the Qasabeh Qanat, Riab village represents an outstanding example of Iran's desert settlements, displaying unique capacities that extend beyond purely historical value. The village stands as a living treasury of the intelligent integration of architecture with climate, the continuity of social rituals, and a traditional agricultural system. Head of Riab's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Department described Riab not merely as a historical site, but as a practical model for sustainable living in arid regions. He noted that while archaeological evidence points to a much older origin, written records estimate the village's age at more than 1,000 years.

In an interview with ISNA, Hamidreza Mahmoudi said what makes Riab unique is the preservation of its functional continuity: traditional agriculture remains active, resource-sharing customs — such as water allocation — are still practiced in their original form, and the village's social structure has not experienced disruption.

He added that Riab, which was officially registered on Iran's National Heritage List in 2008, is currently among the country's final eight villages under review for

nomination as a World Tourism village. This candidacy requires presenting a complete picture of life within a historical context — something Riab has fully achieved. Referring to Riab's proximity to the Qasabeh Qanat, Mahmoudi said the village's local qanat network, with more than 20 kilometers of underground channels, constitutes a significant water



heritage in its own right. This system has been the village's lifeline throughout history and remains its central attraction today.

He also noted that Riab has been a pioneer in local tourism, having hosted the province's first ecotourism. This successful experience demonstrated the region's strong potential for attracting private investment in ecotourism, although further progress requires government support in infrastructure development.

Mahmoudi emphasized that Riab's true value lies in its architecture that is deeply intertwined with environmental physics. The village's traditional houses are not merely shelters, but passive heating and cooling systems that function based on wind flow and temperature differentials.

He explained that the houses are intelligently oriented to capture prevailing winds and channel them through a network of ducts connected to underground cellars. Windcatchers linked to pool rooms (Howzkhaneh) cool and humidify the air before distributing it throughout the interior spaces. In addition, sabats — roofed, shaded passageways — were designed in the alleys to facilitate pedestrian movement during hot summer days. Each house features a private central courtyard that acts as a microclimate, playing a key role in temperature regulation.

Mahmoudi added that the village's defensive section was also systematically organized, reflecting strong social order in the past. Riab contains two concentric fortresses, each with its own towers and ramparts. These structures served not only to defend against invaders, but also to store essential supplies, including grain reserves and equipment needed for prolonged defense.

The village also features a massive defensive moat, approximately six meters wide and four meters deep, excavated around the main fortress structures. In times of emergency, the moat was filled with qanat water, creating a natural defensive barrier.

Mahmoudi concluded that in addition to its residential fabric, Riab is home to numerous attractions, including a historic congregational mosque, several traditional water reservoirs — some of which are still in use — a shrine attributed to Abu Mansur, and an old village school. Together, these elements form a rich collection of religious and educational heritage, presenting a complete picture of an authentic desert community that now stands on the threshold of global recognition.

Lorestan seeks tourism lift-off through targeted projects, public engagement

Social Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Thursday that Lorestan's substantial tourism assets require structured planning and tighter project prioritization, while urging closer engagement with local communities to improve public services that underpin visitor growth, according to remarks delivered during meetings with provincial officials and social activists in Khorramabad.

Addressing the provincial Planning and Development Council on February 19, Pezeshkian described Lorestan as a province with "valuable" tourism capacity, citing its waterfalls, mountainous landscapes and historic landmarks, and said provincial managers must draw up an actionable plan to harness those assets.

The government, he added, would provide support within its legal and budgetary framework, president.ir reported.

Lorestan, located in the central Zagros belt, has long been regarded as one of Iran's most underdeveloped tourism markets despite its dense concentration of natural attractions and cultural heritage sites. Industry officials say the

province's temperate summers, oak forests and river valleys give it a competitive advantage in the growing domestic eco-tourism segment, particularly as households seek lower-cost, short-haul destinations.

Yet fragmented investment and a backlog of unfinished infrastructure projects have curbed its take-off. Pezeshkian said the simultaneous rollout of thousands of half-completed schemes has drained public resources, arguing that Lorestan should narrow its focus to a defined list of priority tourism and infrastructure projects to ensure timely delivery and operational readiness.

He also pointed to managerial inefficiencies, including avoidable energy waste in public buildings, as a drain on provincial budgets. Tighter cost control and higher productivity, he said, would release funds for core sectors such as water management, healthcare, education and transport links, all essential pillars for a functioning tourism economy.

Water stewardship featured prominently in the president's remarks. Despite Lorestan's comparatively strong water endowment, over-extraction from wells and pressure on aquifers risk long-term environmental damage, including land



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian speaks during a visit to the western province of Lorestan, Iran, on February 19, 2026.

● president.ir

subsidence. Sustainable resource management, he said, must run parallel to any expansion of tourism capacity to avoid ecological strain.

Later the same day, in a meeting with social and civic activists in Khorramabad, Pezeshkian shifted the focus to social infrastructure, saying complex provincial challenges cannot be resolved by government alone and require structured cooperation with community actors.

He said the administration is working to connect the executive apparatus more closely with grassroots institutions to improve service delivery, particularly in health and social welfare. While annual spending in the health sector has risen sharply over the past decades, he argued that management reform, not merely additional funding, is needed to ensure resources reach frontline personnel and citizens effectively.

For a tourism-driven province, service quality and social cohesion are critical



variables. Local workforce satisfaction, administrative responsiveness and public trust directly influence visitor experience, investor sentiment and the province's reputation as a safe and welcoming destination.

Pezeshkian said transparent communication with residents over project timelines and budget constraints would help sustain public support, especially where immediate solutions are not fea-

sible. He added that narrowing the gap between officials and citizens would strengthen social capital, a prerequisite for sustainable regional development. With disciplined project selection, environmental safeguards and stronger community engagement, Lorestan could reposition itself as a competitive four-season destination within Iran's domestic travel market in the coming fiscal cycle.

Tehran opens 33rd Int'l Holy Qur'an Fair with 20 foreign delegations

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran opened the 33rd International Holy Qur'an Fair on February 02 at Tehran's Imam Khomeini Mosalla, with representatives from 20 countries attending the two-week event, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization said.

The exhibition, held under the motto "Iran in the Shelter of the Qur'an", runs through March 6, IRNA reported.

Hojatolislam Seyyed Mostafa Hosseini-Neyshabouri, director of the fair's international section, said foreign participants are active across artistic, academic and cultural product segments. 10 coun-



● SNN

tries, including Turkey, Oman, Egypt and Bahrain, are present in the artistic division, while seven are taking part in scholarly programs and three are showcasing Qur'anic cultural products.

Delegations have arrived from North Africa, the wider Arab-Islamic region, neighboring states, Indone-

sia, ASEAN members and the Indian subcontinent, reflecting a deliberate push for geographical diversity. Organizers have scheduled around 20 book unveilings and 20 specialized sessions within the international program. Two prominent non-Iranian Qur'anic figures will be honored alongside domestic contributors

in coordination with national Qur'anic institutions. The fourth Tehran Qur'anic Meeting will convene scholars to address "The Qur'an and the Prophet" in commemoration of the 1,500th anniversary of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Among the invited guests is Algerian scholar Sheikh Abu Jarrah Soltani, author of a 25-volume Qur'anic exegesis.

Alongside Qur'anic works, the fair also presents research and publications related to Nahj al-Balagha (a collection of the sermons, letters and short sayings of Imam Ali (PBUH)) and Sahifa Sajjadiya (hymns of Imam Sajjad (PBUH)) within the broader framework of Qur'an and Ahl al-Bayt scholarship.

Ex-traffic police chief says motorcycle licenses for women fully lawful

Social Desk

There is no gender restriction in Iranian law on issuing motorcycle licenses and that authorities can grant them to women under existing regulations, Mohammadreza Mohmandar, former head of Tehran's Traffic Police, said.

"There is no reference to gender in the legal provisions governing driving licenses, whether for cars or motorcycles," Mehmandar said, describing driving as a public right subject to age and competency requirements rather than sex, ISNA reported.

His comments follow the cabinet's January 28 approval of a nationwide framework to organize formal motorcycle training for women and clear the way for licensing. Under that decision, the Law Enforcement Forces are tasked with arranging practical training for female applicants, with instruction and examinations to be conducted primarily by women. The regulation prioritizes electric motorcycles and sets mandatory safety standards, including certified helmets and technical roadworthiness requirements. Mehmandar said the statutory criteria for obtaining a motorcycle



● AFP

license mirror those already applied to male applicants, including a minimum age of 18, medical fitness, and successful completion of theoretical and practical tests. "The restrictions relate to capability and maturity, not gender," he said.

He added that over the past 20 to 25 years police had refrained from issuing motorcycle licenses to women for reasons that were "not technical in nature", despite the absence of an explicit legal bar. In his view, subsequent provisions assigning responsibility for issuing licenses to men created ambiguity without addressing women's status, a flaw he said stemmed from drafting rather than substance. On safety, Mehmandar rejected claims that licensing women would

create distinct risks. Traffic offences such as speeding or dangerous overtaking are not gender-specific, he said, and are already addressed through fines, penalty points and enforcement measures set out in traffic regulations.

He proposed that dedicated training centers for women, staffed by female instructors, could ease implementation and provide a more comfortable learning environment, though he stressed that existing driving schools are legally sufficient to deliver the required courses.

With training rules, testing procedures and oversight mechanisms already codified, Mehmandar said implementation hinges on administrative resolve. "From a legal standpoint, nothing further is required," he said.

Iran reports 29m gamers, flags funding gap in digital games sector

Social Desk

Iran has 29 million active video-game players, roughly one-third of the population, a senior official at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance said on Friday, urging state bodies and investors to step up financial backing for domestic game developers. Mohsen Qaemi-Nasab, director-general of the Presidential Office at the ministry's Financial Intelligence Center, gave the figure in an interview with IRNA on the sidelines of the "Game Week; Haft-Khan" (a reference to the Seven Labors in Persian epic literature) event at Tehran's Milad Tower, which opened on February 12 and run until the February 18. He said the scale of participation made gaming a serious cultural and economic sector that policymakers could not afford

to ignore. After touring exhibition stands and meeting developers and publishers, Qaemi-Nasab said many studios were seeking structured investment and institutional support to commercialize products and retain creative young talent. Iranian developers, he added, have made tangible technical progress, but require targeted capital and clearer funding channels to scale up production and compete regionally. Vahid Yazdanian, deputy minister for communications and head of National Information Network development, said gaming forms a core component of the network's content layer under its four-tier architecture of infrastructure, network services, applications and content.

Yazdanian said estimates put the number of Iranian gamers between 20 million and

40 million, a user base that in scale and engagement time exceeds many domestic and foreign messaging platforms operating in the country. He linked user satisfaction in online gaming directly to network performance indicators such as latency, bandwidth and stability. Lower ping rates and faster data transmission, he said, translate into higher user satisfaction and serve as measurable benchmarks for the National Information Network's effectiveness. Organized by the National Foundation for Computer Games in cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and Milad Tower, the week-long event consolidates several specialized festivals and industry programs under one platform to showcase capabilities and attract investment into Iran's digital games market.