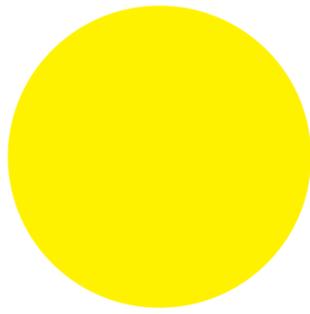


Pezeshkian warns social polarization poses serious challenge to country



8 >



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Deputy FM raps Israel's nuclear arsenal as main obstacle to nuke-free Mideast

'US is main driver behind collapse of international legal order'

2 >



Iran, Azerbaijan ink multifaceted MoU during joint economic commission

3 >



If Trump strikes Iran Mapping oil disruption scenarios

ANALYSIS 4 >



The weight of expectation: Can Qassempour finally conquer 86kg?

6 >



A journey through time, love in Qasr-e Shirin

7 >



Defense minister: Iran pushes back against geopolitical changes, foreign meddling in region

2 >

Iranian Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh (R) and his Arminian counterpart Suren Papikyan inspect a guard of honor during a welcome ceremony in Tehran, Iran on February 24, 2026. © DEFA Press

US support for Israel shifting from security to ideology

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

The US ambassador to Tel Aviv recently voiced support, in an interview, for Israel's expansionist plans to occupy vast parts of the Middle East as a Biblical right. Although he quickly described his remarks as hyperbolic and stressed that Israel has no such intention but does have the right to security within its territory, even this brief reference set off strong reactions from Arab countries and organizations as well as Iran, which described it as extremist and provocative in separate statements. Mehdi Paknia, an expert on US affairs, told Iran Daily that the comments amount to political signaling, sending a message to regional countries that US support for Israel is shifting from a security phase toward an ideological one.



IRAN DAILY: Considering the US ambassador's support for an idea that in some ways overlaps with the concept of "Greater Israel," should these remarks be interpreted as a political message or signal to regional countries, or just as the personal view of a diplomat?

PAKNIA: In the US diplomatic system, particularly on Israel, the distinction between "personal opinion" and "political message" is in practice very limited. The US ambassador to Israel is not a marginal diplomat but part of Washington's policymaking and messaging machinery. When his remarks overlap with concepts rooted in the ideology of "Greater Israel," interpreting them simply as an individual viewpoint would amount to an

excessive simplification of reality. These statements should be seen as a form of political signaling: a multilayered message that both reassures Israel's domestic audience and warns regional actors that Washington's red lines regarding Israel have become not only security-related but also ideological.

To what extent can such positions reflect hidden or forward-looking approaches in Washington's foreign policy toward regional developments? These positions do not necessarily amount to an official declaration of a change in US foreign policy doctrine. However, they point to a clear and strengthening trend: acceptance of realities on the ground in Israel's favor and reduced sensitivity toward their regional consequences. At a time of power erosion and simultaneous engagement on multiple fronts, Washington appears inclined to place a greater share of regional management on an ally willing to act aggressively and at high cost. From this perspective, such remarks could serve as a prelude to a policy in which "stability through Israeli superiority" replaces "conflict management through balance."

What impact do such comments have on strategic calculations inside Israel? Can it be said that they reinforce aggressive and expansionist discourses domestically and give hardline factions greater room in policymaking? Within Israel, this kind of rhetoric has a direct impact on strategic calculations. Hardline and expansionist currents interpret it not as a slip of tongue but as political endorsement. The implicit message is that even if Israel crosses the classical lines of international law, the strategic costs will be managed by the United States. The natural outcome of such an environment is the weakening of more cautious factions and the strengthening of discourses that view military solutions, territorial annexation, and coercive shifts in the balance not as exceptions but as the normal path of policymaking.

How can the unified and strong reaction of Arab and Islamic countries to these remarks be analyzed? Does it show that they have taken the statements seriously and see them as a sign of possible changes in regional balances? The sharp and relatively coordinated response of Arab and Islamic countries appears less emotional than rational and calculation-based. These states have interpreted the remarks as a sign of a gradual but meaningful shift in both limits to Israel's demands and the level of US tolerance.

Page 3 >



Deputy FM raps Israel's nuclear arsenal as main obstacle to nuke-free Mideast

'US is main driver behind collapse of international legal order'



Kazem Gharibabadi (2nd L), Iran's deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs, attends an official meeting in the Swiss city of Geneva on February 23, 2026.

IRNA

International Desk

The Iranian deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs described Israel's nuclear arsenal as the primary obstacle to establishing a West Asia free of nuclear weapons as he underscored the necessity of complete disarmament and the non-discriminatory implementation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Speaking at the high-level segment of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva,

Switzerland, Kazem Gharibabadi highlighted Iran's principled positions and stressed the need for the international community to return to effective multilateralism, achieve genuine disarmament, and ensure unconditional respect for international law. Gharibabadi reiterated the Islamic Republic's longstanding initiative to establish a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the West Asian region, emphasizing that achieving this goal

requires universal adherence to the NPT and the placement of all nuclear facilities in the region under comprehensive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

The deputy foreign minister pointed out that the Israeli regime's possession of weapons of mass destruction and its repeated nuclear threats pose a significant obstacle to realizing this objective.

Israel is estimated to possess 200 to 400 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, making it the sole possessor of non-conventional arms in West Asia.

The occupying regime has refused to either allow inspections of its nuclear sites or sign the NPT.

Gharibabadi described the NPT as the cornerstone of the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime, affirming that the Islamic Republic of Iran has always adhered to its obligations under the treaty.

He stressed that Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy is an inherent and non-negotiable right guaranteed under international law, which cannot be suspended, revoked, or made a precondition for negotiations.

"Iran has always been committed to its obligations under the NPT," the Iranian official said.

"The Islamic Republic does not have nuclear weapons, has never sought to acquire them, and has no intention of doing so. Iran's nuclear program is entirely peaceful and is guided by the country's legal obligations and its ideological and moral principles, which reject WMDs."

Gharibabadi also pointed out that the ongoing armed conflicts, persistent occupation, and crimes committed by the Israeli regime in the West Asia region, along with the erosion of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, pose serious challenges to global peace and security.

The deputy foreign minister emphasized that nuclear weapons pose the greatest threat to humanity and civilization, noting that the ongoing reliance of some countries on such weapons within their security doctrines stands in stark contrast to their international obligations and undermines the ethical and legal foundations of the non-proliferation regime.

He called for an immediate, irreversible, and verifiable commitment from all possessors of such weapons to the complete destruction of their nuclear arsenals.

Firmly rejecting any allegations of military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program, the deputy foreign minister said that the Islamic Republic neither possesses nuclear weapons, nor has it sought to

acquire them, nor does it have any such intention.

Iran's nuclear program is entirely peaceful and is guided by the country's legal obligations and its ideological and ethical principles, which reject weapons of mass destruction, he added.

Elsewhere, Speaking at a high-level meeting of the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations on the sidelines of the UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva, Gharibabadi said the United States is the main factor behind the collapse of the international order based on international law, warning against Washington's systematic disregard for core legal principles.

The deputy FM cited US military interventions, unilateral coercive economic measures, threats to states' territorial integrity, and persistent violations of sovereignty and non-interference as evidence of a calculated effort to undermine the existing legal framework.

Gharibabadi also criticized US support for the Israeli regime, saying Washington's backing, including vetoing draft resolutions aimed at halting the war in Gaza, has enabled war crimes and genocide, emboldening the regime to expand aggression across West Asia, including against Iran's sovereign territory.

Defense minister: Iran pushes back against geopolitical changes, foreign meddling in region



Iran's Minister of Defense Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh (R) meets with Armenia's Defense Minister Suren Papikyan in Tehran on February 24, 2026.

DEFA Press

International Desk

Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh reaffirmed at a high-level meeting with his Armenian counterpart, Suren Papikyan, on Tuesday the Islamic Republic's staunch opposition to any foreign intervention and underscored its unwavering commitment to safeguarding national sovereignty. The two officials also weighed plans to promote cooperation between Tehran and Yerevan, discussing avenues to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation and addressing shared concerns about regional security. Nasirzadeh described Iran-Armenia relations as "deep, historical, and strategically significant," while expressing appreciation for Armenia's condemnation of US and Israeli aggressions against the Islamic Re-

public. Reiterating Tehran's long-standing security doctrine, the defense minister warned that Iran rejects any attempt to disturb the regional geopolitical balance.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran opposes any disruption of the regional geopolitical order," he said, stressing that lasting stability can only be achieved through cooperation among neighboring states.

"External powers, whose interventions are driven by their own interests, pose a direct threat to regional stability."

He also underscored the centrality of territorial integrity in Iran's security posture.

"Iran will not tolerate any encroachment that jeopardizes the sovereignty of regional nations. While Iran does not seek conflict, it will respond decisively should war be

imposed upon it."

Reaffirming the importance of historical ties between the two countries, Papikyan stressed that Yerevan views stability in its southern neighbor as a strategic necessity. "Armenia will never be a source of threat to its historical neighbor," he said. "A stable Iran is fundamental to regional security."

The meeting comes amid a significant US military buildup across the region, including the deployment of carrier strike groups and advanced aircraft, a posture Iran has denounced as provocative amid the resumption of talks over its peaceful nuclear program.

During a visit to Yerevan in May 2025, the Iranian defense minister met with Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan, highlighting the geopolitical and strategic position of Iran and Armenia in the region.

Nasirzadeh announced at the time that the two neighbors can complement each other in a number of sectors and contribute to one another's progress and development, stating that sustainable peace in the Caucasus will pave the way for broader regional cooperation and development.

Gov't spox says Tehran pursues deterrence, diplomacy simultaneously



International Desk

Iranian government spokeswoman Fateh Mohajerani said on Tuesday that President Masoud Pezeshkian's administration consistently prefers diplomacy over war, emphasizing that both diplomacy and deterrence are key strategies aimed at safeguarding national dignity and securing national interests.

While seriously pursuing diplomatic efforts, the government is also strengthening deterrence capabilities through the armed forces who are fully prepared, Mohajerani said, adding that recent military drills reflect that readiness, and at

the same time, negotiations are being followed with caution and vigilance.

The government spokeswoman also said that authorities are closely monitoring developments, remain committed to the outcomes of diplomatic processes, and are prepared to use all deterrent tools to prevent any miscalculation.

"In sum, we are fully prepared for both paths," she said.

Since February 6, Tehran and Washington have held two rounds of fresh nuclear talks with Omani mediation. The first round took place in the Omani capital Muscat, while the second was held in the Swiss city.

IRGC holds hybrid drill in south amid US escalation



TASNIM

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces conducted a combined military exercise in southern parts of Iran and the Persian Gulf islands. The drill featured controlled live-fire operations carried out in accordance with the range of various weapons and newly adopted combined tactics, utilizing modern technologies across different operational layers, as reported by Tasnim.

Last week, the IRGC Navy launched a military exercise titled "Smart Control of the Strait of Hormuz" in the strategic

waterway.

The combined, live, and targeted drill was conducted under the supervision, control, and field monitoring of IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Pakpour.

The main objectives of the naval war game included assessing the operational readiness of the IRGC Navy's units, reviewing support plans and scenarios for reciprocal military action, and making intelligent use of the geopolitical advantages of Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman.



Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

CARTOON



Iran, Azerbaijan ink multifaceted MoU during joint economic commission

Economy Desk

Iran and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding at the 17th Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation in Baku, outlining collaboration across 10 sectors including transport, energy, electricity, water and agriculture, ISNA reported on Tuesday. Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh Malvajerd, and Azerbaijan's Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev, signed the MoU to establish a framework for cooperation.

"In the memorandum of understanding of the 17th Joint Commission, numerous subjects in the areas of trade cooperation, investment, industry, electricity, transport, infrastructure, culture, agriculture and tourism have been discussed and agreed upon," Malvajerd said during the opening of the two-day commission meeting on Monday.

In the transport sector, the two sides agreed on road transport, border management and rail development. Key infrastructure projects outlined in the document include the Kalaleh-Aqband bridge, the Astara bridge, widening of the Kalaleh-Jolfa road, the rail connection between Kalaleh and Siyahrud, and the launch of the Astara rail terminal at the border, with both parties emphasizing the need to accelerate their implementation.



Minister of Roads and Urban Development Farzaneh Sadegh Malvajerd (l) and Azerbaijan's Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev display the signed memorandum of understanding after the 17th Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation in Baku on February 23, 2026. mrud.ir

"The trade volume between Iran and Azerbaijan has reached about \$650 million over the past two years, and the trend of exchanges has been upward in recent years," the Iranian minister said.

Malvajerd identified transport and transit as among the most important axes of cooperation, adding, "Last year, about 120,000 Iranian trucks traveled within Azerbaijan's territory, and more than 50,000 Azerbaijani trucks entered Iranian soil, which indicates the extensive volume of transit activities between the two countries." "To achieve the target of 15 million tons of transit by 2030 in the western branch of the North-South Corridor, the movement of vehicles from both countries must increase more than three-fold, which requires enhancing procedural and infrastructural capacities at shared borders," she said.

In the energy sector, the two sides approved cooperation in oil blocks one and two and the formation of a joint working group



to follow up and implement related memorandums. In electricity, agreements were reached on connecting the power grids of Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, as well as on electricity exports from Azerbaijan to Iran.

On water resources, the two parties discussed and reached necessary agreements on cooperation related to the Khodaafarin and Qiz Qalasi dams and power plants, as well as matters concerning the Marazad-Ordubad power plants.

Beyond these sectors, understandings were also reached in sports and youth affairs, cultural and social sectors, tourism,

agriculture, customs, industry, investment and other economic fields, culminating in the signing of the cooperation document, which could pave the way for expanding economic relations and strengthening strategic cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan.

On Tuesday, during a meeting with Azerbaijan's Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov, Malvajerd emphasized accelerating the financial settlement of joint projects and expanding cooperation in electricity, grid interconnection and development of shared oil fields.

The Iranian minister cited elec-

tricity purchases as another area of cooperation, saying the issue was welcomed by the Azerbaijani side during a meeting of the two countries' presidents. Iran's Ministry of Energy has formally requested, via an official letter, the purchase of 200 to 300 megawatts of electricity from Azerbaijan during peak consumption seasons and is awaiting a response from the Azerbaijani side. She also listed the interconnection of electricity grids among Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia as another key topic, stressing, "This plan must be finalized and implemented with the cooperation of the three countries."

RAI rail freight tops 5m tons, setting record amid sanctions



Economy Desk

Iran's international rail freight transport crossed the 5-million-ton threshold on Tuesday, marking a new milestone in the country's rail transport history, Shariyar Naqizadeh, director general of Foreign Trade at the Railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran (RAI), told IRNA.

While total international rail freight also reached 5 million tons last year, this year's milestone was achieved on February 24, representing 7% growth compared to the same period last year, Naqizadeh added.

He emphasized the significance of this achievement, noting it was attained under the most severe sanctions and political pressures, which have undoubtedly affected international rail transport.

"This year, and through efforts made, by signing bilateral and multilateral memorandums of understanding with neighboring countries as well as with countries along these corridor routes, and through extensive rail diplomacy, we managed to extract this performance from international agreements," he said. Naqizadeh referred to several key agreements underpinning this growth, including a six-party memorandum along the China-Europe rail route with countries along the corridor; a three-party agreement on the North-South Corridor with Russia and Turkmenistan (on the eastern branch) and with Azerbaijan (on the western branch); and a three-party memorandum among Iran, Pakistan and Turkey.

Iran seeks rail extension to Iraq to create east-west corridor: VP

Economy Desk

Iran is seeking to reach an agreement with Iraq to extend a key domestic railway line from the western province of Kermanshah into Iraqi territory, aiming to transform the route into a major international transport corridor, a senior official said on Tuesday. "The Kermanshah to Islamabad-e Gharb railway project has made progress and we are following up on a memorandum of understanding with Iraq to extend this project," Mohammad Jafar Qaempanah, Iran's Vice President for Executive Affairs, told reporters after inspecting the construction site, according to ISNA. Qaempanah emphasized that the project's success depends on extending the line to the Khosravi border crossing and Iraq simultaneously completing its portion of the route.

He explained that under the proposed agreement, the route would be implemented on the Iraqi side from Baghdad to Khanaqin, and from Khanaqin to the Khosravi border. "The extension of this route with Iraq's cooperation will form an east-west corridor, which could be very significant for transporting goods from northwestern Iran and Turkmenistan to Iraq. We are seeking to realize this," Qaempanah added. On funding, he noted that financial resources for the project have been secured and approved for the next one to two years.

Minister: Power capacity to surpass 100,000 MW, largest in West Asia



Economy Desk

Iran's electricity generation capacity will soon exceed 100,000 megawatts, becoming the largest power grid in West Asia, Energy Minister Abbas Aliabadi said on Tuesday as he inaugurated 48 power-related projects in Isfahan Province.

Aliabadi attributed the management of electricity supply-demand shortage to a simultaneous increase in production and

public cooperation in reducing consumption, adding that this approach would continue with planning for the upcoming summer, IRNA reported.

"In the power sector, consumption decreased by about 3% compared to last year; this is while a developing country typically expects 6% to 7% consumption growth. This reduction in consumption is a commendable achievement," he told reporters on the sidelines

of the ceremony marking the launch and operationalization of electricity industry projects in the central province.

"For the upcoming summer, our plan is to add new power plants and strengthen transmission and distribution infrastructure," the minister said, noting that extensive measures are underway to expand smart systems and improve the distribution network.

8,000 MW added to grid

"This year, we added about 8,000 megawatts of combined solar and thermal power plants to the grid, which is a notable record," he said.

Turning to water resources, the minister said an average reduction of about 25 liters in per capita consumption had been recorded, reflecting the impact of public cooperation in optimal use.

"Over the past five years, the country has faced continuous drought. Although this year shows about a 26% improvement compared to last year, we

remain below long-term normal levels," he said.

Aliabadi said 57 cities across Iran are under water stress, adding that Tehran Province is not in a favorable situation and Isfahan also requires greater public cooperation.

To manage water demand, the Ministry of Energy is distributing water-saving equipment that can reduce consumption by up to 30%, particularly for high-consumption subscribers, the minister said.

He also said cloud seeding operations have been carried out using more than 50 sorties of aircraft and drones employing scientific methods, under the supervision of an academic scientific committee.

Aliabadi emphasized the importance of developing distributed generation power plants. "The country's electricity imports are less than 500 megawatts, and by developing distributed generation plants — which create a more stable and resilient grid from both environmental and passive de-

fense perspectives — we must further strengthen conditions for maintaining power grid stability," he said.

The 48 projects inaugurated on Tuesday in Isfahan Province include network development, improvements to distribution and sub-transmission substation capacity, subscriber smartification, and upgrades to electricity networks and facilities. The projects aim to ensure a stable electricity supply and increase energy efficiency across the province.

"The projects inaugurated today will play an important role in grid stability," Aliabadi said.

"These plans have been implemented with the aim of improving the quality and reliability of the power system, addressing problems in weak networks, and providing stable electricity for industries and various areas of the province. Operationalizing these projects will be an important step toward upgrading energy infrastructure and improving services to subscribers in Isfahan Province."

US support for ...

The high sensitivity of the reactions suggests that the statements have been read as a "plausible future scenario," rather than as a media sideshow. In fact, the main concern is that what is being raised rhetorically today may be consolidated as a reality on the ground tomorrow.

What impact could such positions have on the normaliza-

tion process between some Arab countries and Israel? Could they slow down or even halt such diplomatic trends?

The normalization process is highly dependent on the perceptual environment of public opinion. Such remarks increase the political cost of normalization for Arab governments and constrain their maneuvering space. Even countries that have security and economic interests in co-

operation with Israel may find themselves compelled to slow the process or place it on hold. Normalization advances when Israel is seen as a controllable and predictable actor, not as one that, backed by the United States, normalizes expansionist horizons.

At a time when regional crises from Gaza to the Red Sea continue, what impact will such

rhetoric have on tension levels and the likelihood of new alliances emerging in the region?

Against the backdrop of active crises from Gaza to the Red Sea, these remarks effectively contribute to rising tensions. They reinforce the narrative of actors opposed to the United States and Israel and create space for new, even if temporary and tactical, forms of convergence.

Under such conditions, the likelihood of alliances based on "detering a common threat" increases. These alliances may not be formal, but they can complicate the regional balance and raise its costs in practice. From a realist perspective, such rhetoric does not reduce tensions; rather, it fuels an accumulation of mistrust and adds to the acceleration of hard-power competition in the region.

If Trump strikes Iran

Mapping oil disruption scenarios



By Clayton Seigle
Senior fellow at
Center for Strategic
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Studies

ANALYSIS

Crude oil prices have fluctuated in recent days along with headlines about potential military strikes against Iran, as a second round of indirect talks between US and Iranian representatives concluded on February 17 without resolving underlying disputes. While international benchmark Brent crude prices fell toward \$67 on February 17, markets are still showing increased risk against the US Energy Information Administration's predicted \$58 Brent average for 2026. President Donald Trump has hinted at potential military strikes unless Iran agrees to fully abandon nuclear enrichment, accept strict limits on missile capabilities, and halt support for its backed groups in the region. This analysis assesses the risk of oil supply disruptions that could result from a new conflagration in the Middle East Persian Gulf region.

Oil in crosshairs this time?

During last June's 12-Day War between Iran and Israel, joined by the United States in Operation Midnight Hammer, Persian Gulf oil exports avoided major disruption. This was predictable since a cutoff in Persian Gulf export flows would necessarily halt Iran's own oil exports. As the 12-Day War transpired, Iran perceived that it was not facing an existential crisis as its oil exports continued unimpeded, and Tehran made no attempt to target Arab Persian Gulf oil assets or shipping. Fast forward to today — the Islamic Republic faces unprecedented vulnerability following the blows inflicted by Israel, including the degradation of Hezbollah's capabilities, and more recently, the biggest wave of anti-government unrest in its 47-year history. Meanwhile, Trump is publicly escalating rhetoric by assembling significant military assets in the region, pressuring Tehran to accept US demands, and personally threatening the Leader of Iran's Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Therefore, if hostilities resume with the United States or Israel, Iran may indeed perceive an existential threat, bringing its counter-threat against regional oil supplies into play. Six oil-producing states in the Persian Gulf depend on unimpeded shipping access via the Strait of Hormuz to reach world markets. Their relative dependency on the strategic waterway is depicted in the chart.

What disruptions could look like

There are four oil supply disruption scenarios worth consider-



A map showing the Strait of Hormuz and Iran is seen behind a 3D printed oil pipeline in this illustration taken on June 22, 2025.
DADO RUVIC/REUTERS

The photo shows the visage of US President Donald Trump on a billboard watching over fuel prices in the country, displayed at an Exxon Mobil Corp. gas station.
EPA

ing, and an observation about a Persian Gulf liquefied natural gas export outage scenario.

Scenario 1: US or Israel disrupts Iranian crude oil shipments

This could take the form of blockading or seizing Kharg Island, the principal facility for loading Iranian oil onto ships, and seizing oil tanker vessels transporting Iranian crude. This could disrupt up to 1.6 mb/d of Iranian crude oil exports, all of which go to China. However, since oil is a global, fungible commodity, a disruption anywhere affects prices everywhere. A loss of Iranian barrels would cause China to bid for substitute supplies, probably worth at least a \$10–12 increase in the global price of crude oil. This scenario is reversible, meaning that the United States or Israel could call off its campaign against Iranian shipments at any time with no permanent damage having been incurred and export volumes rebounding thereafter, like what was seen following the US quarantine on Venezuelan oil shipments. Insurance and war-risk premiums could keep prices elevated longer than any physical supply interruption.

Scenario 2: Iran disrupts Arab Persian Gulf oil shipping

This campaign would likely target Persian Gulf export flows transiting the Strait of Hormuz, in which the inbound and outbound shipping lanes are only two miles wide. Iran could attempt to divert or seize control of oil tankers, or strike them outright using fast attack craft, drones, anti-ship missiles, or naval mines. Up to 18 million barrels per day (mb/d) — perhaps far less — of non-Iranian crude oil and refined petroleum products could be throttled or temporarily halted.

This scenario could see several mb/d disrupted for a period of weeks until allied naval forces are able to neutralize sea- and shore-based threats to energy cargo flows. Oil prices would initially spike with surging freight and insurance rates, and with some ship operators likely fleeing the region, further diminishing export capacity. As traders

assess the volume and duration of a physical disruption, crude prices could climb past \$90 per barrel, pushing US retail gasoline prices well above \$3 per gallon on a national average basis (some regions higher). Like Scenario 1, this chain of events is reversible; Tehran could call off its disruptive activities at any time, or global forces could quell their attempts at interruption, enabling Persian Gulf export volumes to rebound.

Scenario 3: US or Israel directly attacks Iranian oil facilities

In this scenario, air and naval forces would strike Kharg Island and its supply lines, offshore production platforms, and (less likely) Iran's oil refineries. Iran's export terminal at Kharg Island accounts for nearly all of its 1.6 mb/d average export volume. Kharg could be taken offline in several ways, including disabling or destroying its ship loading equipment (hoses, pumps, and connecting hardware), damaging its oil storage tanks, or cutting off the flow of oil that reaches Kharg via sub-sea pipelines. Choke points for oil deliveries to Kharg include the onshore Ghurreh booster station, the manifold station at Ganaveh, and the pipelines themselves.

Not only are Iran's 1.6 mb/d crude oil exports (if limited to Kharg) at stake, but also its additional 1.5 mb/d of domestic oil production (should platforms/fields be targeted) and its domestic supply of transportation fuels like gasoline (if refineries are damaged). The oil price effects would likely be greater than the \$10–12 per barrel spike anticipated with Scenario 1 for two reasons: (1) damage to or destruction of Iranian infrastructure could keep barrels off the market for a protracted period of time (potentially offset by activation of OPEC spare production capacity), and (2) anticipation of a further escalation by Iran with something like Scenario 4 (described below). This track, therefore, could take oil prices above \$100 per barrel.

Scenario 4: Iran directly attacks Arab Persian Gulf oil facilities

This outcome could include producing fields, gathering and processing nodes, or oil export



President Trump faces a dilemma in how to confront Iran without incurring an unwanted oil supply disruption and gasoline price spike. In Operation Midnight Hammer and in the operation to capture Nicholas Maduro, Trump selected military options with low risk of negative consequences (e.g., US casualties, energy price increases). But Scenarios 2 and 4 afford Tehran leverage that could deter Trump from undertaking a major military operation against Iran.

The chart shows Persian Gulf oil exporters' reliance on the Strait of Hormuz, measured in million barrels of oil per day.
VORTEXA



terminals. In this scenario, a substantial portion of the 18 mb/d non-Iranian oil exports from the Persian Gulf, depending on which assets might be taken offline and for how long, would be at stake. Potentially millions more barrels per day in the affected countries' domestic crude feedstocks and refined product supply would also be at risk.

This scenario could lead to a historic oil price spike, potentially higher than the \$130 per barrel that was touched in 2022 following Russia's attack on Ukraine. The oil supply at risk at that time was approximately 5 mb/d.

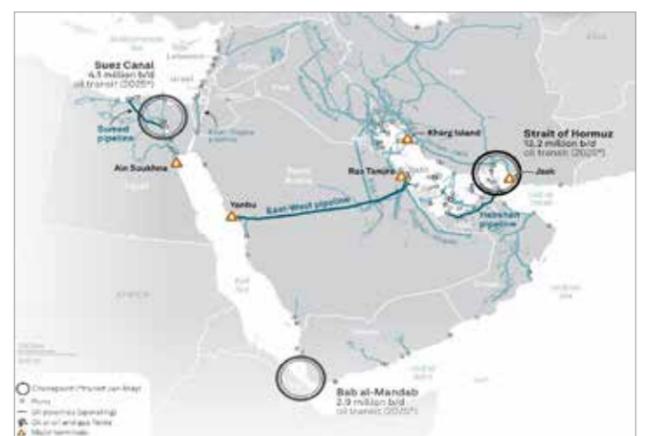
Like Scenario 3, this case could see oil facilities heavily damaged or even destroyed, removing export capacity for a protracted period. This is true not only for

Flows of liquefied natural gas (LNG) through the Strait of Hormuz to world markets could also be interrupted during a new conflagration.

Qatar's shipments of more than 10 billion cubic feet per day could be reduced or cut off by naval mines or direct attack on gas tanker vessels, or by disabling its export terminal at the Port of Ras Laffan. This could increase electric power prices as far away as the United States, complicating policymakers' efforts to promote affordability for US consumers.

Hormuz bypass potential is limited

Export routes that bypass the Strait can handle only a fraction of daily Persian Gulf exports.



2025 S&P GLOBAL

onshore infrastructure, but especially for offshore loading platforms, which constitute a critical bottleneck in export capacity. One example of this vulnerability is that Iraq's entire Persian Gulf export flow of 3.5 mb/d relies on offshore loading facilities very close to Iranian territorial waters. These offshore loading points can take considerable time to repair — a November 29 Ukrainian strike on a similar offshore loading platform at the Black Sea's Caspian Pipeline Consortium terminal knocked 500 thousand barrels per day (kb/d), a third of the terminal's output, offline for months.

Onshore facilities are also vulnerable but can be repaired faster, depending on the repair resources available. For example, the September 2019 attack on Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq crude oil processing facility initially disrupted about 5 mb/d, but most of that volume was restored in less than two weeks following rapid repair efforts.

Saudi Aramco's East-West Pipeline connects the kingdom's oil production centers in the Eastern Province with the Red Sea Yanbu Commercial Port. The pipeline could reroute some barrels from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, but only in reduced volumes. The pipeline is believed to have a capacity of 5 mb/d. But it is already supplying Yanbu with close to 800 kb/d for export cargoes, and likely supplying six Saudi Aramco refineries in central and western Saudi Arabia with about 1.8 mb/d. That would leave only about 2.4 mb/d of spare capacity in the pipeline, compared to Saudi Arabia's typical 6 mb/d from its Persian Gulf terminals — enabling the rerouting of less than half of its Persian Gulf exports.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) can reroute about half of its 2 mb/d of Persian Gulf exports via pipeline to its port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman, bypassing

	Total exports	Gulf exports	Reliance on Hormuz
Saudi Arabia	6.6	5.8	89%
Iraq	3.4	3.3	97%
UAE	3.2	2.1	66%
Iran	1.6	1.6	100%
Kuwait	1.5	1.5	100%
Qatar	0.8	0.8	100%

the Strait of Hormuz. Fujairah already accounts for about one-third of the UAE's total 3.2 mb/d export volume, implying that the remaining third (1 mb/d) would remain stranded in a Hormuz closure. Other Persian Gulf oil-exporting countries — Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar (5.7 mb/d total volume) — have no Hormuz bypass capacity; likewise, there's no

other outlet for Qatar's 10 billion cubic feet per day of LNG exports.

How scenarios might unfold

President Trump faces a dilemma in how to confront Iran without incurring an unwanted oil supply disruption and gasoline price spike. In Operation Midnight Hammer and in the

operation to capture Nicholas Maduro, Trump selected military options with low risk of negative consequences (e.g., US casualties, energy price increases). But Scenarios 2 and 4 afford Tehran leverage that could deter Trump from undertaking a major military operation against Iran. Meanwhile, Israel, which launched the 12-Day War against Iran last summer,

remains a wildcard. Washington certainly has a large list of Iranian targets for kinetic action, many of which may not involve energy. Insofar as oil leverage may be used as part of a pressure campaign against Tehran, it is likely to start with Scenario 1 (US/Israel disrupts Iranian crude oil shipments), and Iran will face a dilemma about how to respond. If Iran

pursues Scenario 2 (Iran disrupts Arab Persian Gulf oil shipping), the United States will seek to neutralize Iran's naval and shore-based anti-ship capabilities, arguably leaving Tehran with only Scenario 4 (Iran directly attacks Arab Persian Gulf oil facilities) left to employ — one that could cause the United States to implement Scenario 3 (US/Israel directly attack Iranian oil facilities) — and seek the

regime's outright defeat or destruction. Iran's "use it or lose it" dilemma could provoke Tehran to resort to Scenario 4 — direct attacks on Arab Persian Gulf oil facilities — as maybe its last card to play to stave off defeat.

The article was first published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Why Iran may prove a battlefield for US unlike Iraq or Afghanistan



By Sabine Ameer
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OPINION

US President Donald Trump has threatened to attack Iran militarily. Recent reports suggest that an aircraft carrier has been deployed to Middle Eastern waters by the US, with Trump warning that a "massive fleet" was headed to the region "just in case". The looming question remains: Will the US actively strike against Iran? And if so, what would that battlefield look like? Amid this rage bait, one thing is clear: Iran is not the Iraq of 2003, and it certainly isn't the Afghanistan of 2001. Iran is a different battlefield entirely — militarily, geographically, and diplomatically.

Iran's advanced artillery, rugged terrains

When the US-led coalition invaded Iraq in 2003, the rapid collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime was held up as a demonstration of American military precision. But the days of "triumph" were followed by a prolonged occupation, sectarian fragmentation, and a violent insurgency, with the state still struggling to recover two decades later. Although not on par with the air capabilities of the US, Iran possesses a far more advanced defence infrastructure than pre-2003 Iraq, comprising one of the largest stockpiles of drones and ballistic missiles in West Asia, as well as cyber warfare tools.

Following Israel's strike on Iran's nuclear facilities last year, Tehran demonstrated its ability to breach Tel Aviv's multilayered air defence system, the Iron Dome. There was speculation about Iran's potential deployment of hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) — weapons capable of manoeuvring at hypersonic speeds — significantly complicating interception efforts. While unconfirmed, the possibility of Tehran possessing such capabilities signals that Iran's military deterrence is no longer ordinary.

Further, unlike Iraq's flat and open terrain, Iran's geography is rugged and mountainous. The Zagros range in the west, combined with the Alborz mountains in the north, provides natural defensive barriers that complicate any potential air and ground operations. In the event of a ground incursion, US forces might face significant logistical obstacles. Tanks and convoys that rolled through Iraqi des-



Women take a selfie at the Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force Museum outside Tehran, Iran, on November 12, 2025.
IRNA

erts would become easy targets in Iran's narrow passes. The terrain naturally lends itself to guerrilla warfare, something Iran's forces, mainly the Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC), are equipped for.

Axis factor: a major challenge

Iran maintains strong alliances with the "Axis of Resistance": the Hezbollah, the Ansarullah (Houthis), and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are embedded within state structures as key components of Iran's defence architecture. Since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, American bases in Syria and Iraq have been attacked over 55 times, while Houthi disruptions in the Red Sea have escalated tensions. Unlike 2003 Iraq, where armed groups were fragmented, Iran is the epicentre of these groups. Despite being potentially weakened, axis members — Yemen's Houthis and Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah — have issued direct threats in response to any attack targeting Iran, warning that a "total war" in the region would result.

Pre-2003 Iraq was marred by political instability, but Iran has a functioning state machinery controlled centrally. Iran may not "win" a full-scale military confrontation against the US. However, it could strategically benefit by activating the Axis of Resistance and leveraging its military infrastructure, difficult terrain, and asymmetric tactics.

Iran's case defies Afghan playbook

The Taliban was never internationally recognised or integrated into the global diplomatic system. In contrast, Iran is a sovereign state with established institutions, formal diplomatic relations, and significant stakes in global energy markets. In Afghanistan, the Taliban faced an internal resistance following the immediate collapse of a fragile, externally supported government. Tehran has had a

long-standing regime that has proven to be resilient even in the face of enormous pressure following the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani and economic sanctions. Even if the US succeeds in weakening Iran's leadership, a fragmented Iran would be no better. As with Afghanistan, political disintegration would invite militia rule, interference of backed groups, and years of power vacuum, with far greater regional consequences. Unlike Afghanistan, Iran's ability to respond asymmetrically, through cyber warfare, armed groups, and energy disruption, gives it a unique form of deterrence that is hard to counter. Without a long-term exit strategy and regional consensus, any military action against Iran risks a more dangerous version of the very quagmire the US tried to escape in Afghanistan.

Multipolar pushback, regional fallout

A US military attack on Iran would face significant pushback from global powers with vested interests in the region. For instance, Moscow has significantly strengthened its ties with Iran, particularly in the military and energy sectors. The two nations have engaged in technology transfers around drone warfare, shared intelligence, and developed sanctions-evasion channels to sustain their economies. Should the US strike, Russia is unlikely to intervene directly but could open indirect fronts: carrying out cyberattacks on Western infrastructure, causing financial disruptions, or activating proxies in Syria, thus raising the costs of US action without triggering full-scale confrontation.

Similarly, Iran is vital to China's Belt and Road Initiative and its long-term energy security strategy. China's role in brokering the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement signalled Beijing's deepening diplomatic investment in the Middle East. Rather than re-

sponding militarily, China could retaliate economically, disrupt supply chains, leverage oil markets, and isolate US efforts in multilateral forums.

In the past, China and Russia have jointly conducted regular naval drills with Iran in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf waters. Russian and Chinese involvement could, therefore, amplify the strategic, economic, and political risks of any unilateral US military action. Prolonged engagement could exhaust US forces and create pressure for negotiation. In this scenario, there would be no clear endgame, only protracted regional instability.

struggling with high levels of inflation.

Iran's internal faultlines and US leverage

With Israeli backing, Washington could seek to amplify civil unrest, undermining Iran's geopolitical position, as echoed in calls from some Republican officials to arm Iranian protesters. Beyond these factors, Tehran also faces mounting strategic constraints, including prolonged economic sanctions, conventional military asymmetries vis-à-vis the US, and the financial strain of sustaining its regional network. The US might also expand support for anti-Axis militant

Rescue and security personnel work at an impact site following a missile attack from Iran on Israel, in Ramat Gan, Israel, on June 13, 2025, the first day of the Israeli-initiated 12-Day War.
ITAI RON/REUTERS



A war that could cripple global economy

Perhaps the most dangerous fallout of the US-Iran confrontation isn't military at all — it's economic. Iran controls key positions along the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow but vital maritime passage through which nearly one-fifth of the world's oil supply flows. If Iran were to block or disrupt this route, even temporarily, global oil markets would react immediately, pushing oil prices to \$110 per barrel. Energy-intensive sectors like manufacturing, aviation, and shipping would feel the brunt, rendering countries heavily reliant on Persian Gulf energy — India, China, Japan, and many EU member states — into major energy security dilemmas. In parallel, retaliatory strikes on tankers, pipelines, and oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia or the UAE — something Iran-aligned groups have done in the past — could further shrink supply, rerouting traffic through longer and costlier maritime paths.

Markets would absorb the uncertainty, but supply chains and consumers would pay the price, thereby making a US-Iran confrontation not just a Middle East flashpoint. A full-scale conflict with Iran could shock global energy systems and disrupt food and fuel supply chains at a time when the world economy is still

groups within Iran. These include the Mujahedin Khalq (MEK), formerly designated as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU; the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), an armed Kurdish separatist group; and Al-Ahwaziya, an Arab nationalist movement seeking independence for Khuzestan Province. However, such strategies carry significant risks beyond destabilisation. After a civil conflict, Iran could plausibly fall under hardline military rule.

US-led military operations did not bring stability to Iraq or Afghanistan, and any such effort is even less likely to succeed in Iran's case. Iran's military strength today far surpasses that of Iraq or the Taliban in the early 2000s. Tehran has invested heavily in an asymmetric war doctrine that relies not on matching Western firepower but on making US military action costly, prolonged, and politically untenable. The stakes would be far higher, not only in terms of regional fallout but also in the broader context of an already fragile multipolar global order. Any US policy concerning Iran, therefore, must reckon with these structural differences rather than ignore them.

The full article was first published by the Observer Research Foundation.

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The weight of expectation: Can Qassempour finally conquer 86kg?

Sports Desk

While some of the world's best freestyle wrestlers prepare to battle at the second UWW Ranking Series event of the season in Tirana this week, one of the most scrutinized figures in Iranian wrestling won't even be on the plane. Kamran Qassempour, the two-time world champion, is sitting this one out. And in his absence, a host of hungry contenders in the 86kg weight class are set to take the mat, reshaping the division Qassempour is desperate to call his own. The 86kg category has long been hallowed ground for Iranian wrestling, forever associated with the legendary Hassan Yazdani. But with Yazdani's permanent move to 97kg, the spotlight has shifted firmly onto Qassempour. His mission is clear: reclaim the weight class for Iran. However, his path is littered with obstacles, and his decision to skip the Muhamet Malo tournament in the Albanian capital raises pressing questions about his future.

A history of instability

Qassempour's career has been defined by extraordi-

nary success, but also by a frustrating lack of stability. After years of waiting in the wings behind Yazdani at 86kg, he made the bold decision to move to 92kg. It paid off spectacularly. Qassempour conquered the division, capturing back-to-back world gold medals in 2021 and 2022. But the 92kg category carries a fatal flaw: it is not an Olympic weight. Forced to choose between his title and a shot at Olympic glory, Qassempour bulked up to 97kg. The move proved disastrous. Unable to adapt to the division's giants, he failed to secure a quota for the Paris 2024 Olympics, a bitter blow for an athlete of his caliber. Now, with Paris in the rearview mirror, Qassempour has returned to his roots at 86kg. But homecoming has not been kind. At the World Championships and the Islamic Solidarity Games last year, he could only manage bronze medals. For a wrestler of his pedigree, and for a nation with Iran's standards, bronze is not enough.

Ghosts of Albania

The upcoming ranking series in Tirana will feature a murderer's row of talent at



Iranian freestyle wrestler Kamran Qassempour (blue) is seen in action during a training session in Tehran, Iran, on February 21, 2026.
 ● iawfir

86kg, many of whom could become Qassempour's biggest hurdles in 2026. The American challenge remains formidable. In Tirana, all eyes will be on Kyle Dake. A multiple-time world and Olympic medalist, Dake is stepping up from his traditional 74kg to test the waters at 86kg. His technical mastery makes him an im-

mediate threat.

Then there is the ghost of defeats past. Azerbaijan's Arsenii Dzhoiev handed Qassempour a painful loss at the Islamic Solidarity Games last November. Dzhoiev will be on the mat in Albania, looking to prove that victory was no fluke. Russian Ibragim Kadiev, another entrant, has already scouted the com-

petition firsthand, having recently dominated in the Iranian domestic league. Adding to the chaos are two more high-profile weight jumpers. Georgios Kougioumtsidis of Greece, the reigning world champion at 79kg, is moving up to a new class. Georgia's Vladimeri Gamkrelidze, a former world silver medalist, is also

vacating his 79kg position for a shot at 86kg. While these contenders sharpen their skills in Albania, Qassempour will be watching from home, preparing for a different assignment.

The road ahead

The Iranian coaching staff has mapped out a deliberate path for their star. With no competitive outings in 2026 so far, Qassempour is being held back for the Asian Championships in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in April. The plan is clear: a dominant performance there would stake his claim for a spot at the World Championships later this year.

But the strategy carries risk. While Qassempour waits, his rivals are building momentum and gaining invaluable competitive reps. The 86kg division is evolving rapidly, and the wrestlers who perform well in Albania will arrive at future tournaments with confidence and data.

There are also lingering questions about Qassempour's physique. Wrestling insiders have noted his muscular build, and competing at 86kg — a weight that requires significant cut-

ting — could place immense strain on his body over the long grind toward the next Olympic cycle.

A season of redemption

For Qassempour, 2026 is a season of reckoning. The two bronze medals of last year are not befitting of his talent, and he knows it. He has proven he can win world titles — but that was at 92kg. Now, back in the weight class he once left behind, he must confront a new generation of hungry contenders.

The competition in Albania will not decide Qassempour's fate, but it will set the tone for the year ahead. By the time he steps on the mat in Bishkek, his rivals will already be battle-hardened. For Iranian wrestling fans, the hope is that Qassempour can finally break the bronze-medal streak, silence the doubters, and reclaim the 86kg throne. The tools are there. The question is whether he can put them all together when it matters most.

The season is just beginning, but for Qassempour, the weight of expectation has never been heavier.

Italian Manicone leaves Iran coaching staff for Serie A strugglers Pisa

Sports Desk

Italian Antonio Manicone has left his role as an assistant to Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee to join Serie A club Pisa, which is currently mired in a desperate fight to avoid relegation.

Manicone joined the Iranian coaching staff in June 2023 and was with the Asian powerhouse at AFC Asian Cup in 2024, where Iran reached the semifinals before bowing out to host Qatar, as well as a success-

ful qualification campaign for the 2026 World Cup.

According to Italian media reports, including Calcio Pisa, Manicone will serve as the No. 1 to young Swedish head coach, Oscar Hilje-mark. To finalize the move, Manicone had to terminate his contract with Team Melli, a process that concluded without any major official announcement from Iranian football authorities.

Manicone returns to a familiar environment. He began his playing

career at Inter and Udinese and later coached within Inter's youth system. He has also served on the staff of Vladimir Petkovic at Lazio and with the Swiss national team, in addition to a stint at Bordeaux in France.

His arrival at Pisa, which currently sits 19th in the Serie A table, is seen as a strategic move to bolster the coaching staff with experience. Italian outlet Sesta Porta notes that his extensive knowledge of Italian football and his international

background — including what it describes as one of the most sensitive periods of his career with Iran — are expected to provide a crucial balance to Hilje-mark's youthful energy as the club navigates its crisis. For Manicone, the move marks a return home after a period in the very different environment of Iranian football. For Pisa, his arrival is a bet on experience to steady a sinking ship, with every point now vital for survival in Italy's top flight.



● FFIRI

Sepahan hold second place after win over Esteghlal Khuzestan

Sports Desk

Sepahan secured a 3-1 home victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan and is currently in second place in the Iran Pro League, level on points with Esteghlal but behind on goal difference.

The Week 22 encounter was played at Naghsh-e Jahan Stadium, just days after Sepahan's elimination from the AFC Champions League Round of 16. Eager to respond, the hosts began the match with intensity and purpose.

Esteghlal Khuzestan struck first in the 8th minute, as Amirhossein Jalalvand found the net to give the visitors an early advantage under head coach Amir Khalifeh-Asl. The lead held until the closing moments of the first half, when Arash Rezaevand equalized for Sepahan just before the break, sending both teams into halftime level at 1-1, IRNA wrote.



● akharinkhabar.ir

Sepahan controlled possession and territory throughout the first half and maintained their dominance after the restart. Their pressure paid off in the 68th minute, when Kaveh Rezaei curled in a stunning free kick to put the hosts ahead.

Late drama followed in the final minutes. In the 88th minute, after a VAR review, referee Shobeir Behroozi awarded Sepahan a penalty, but Ricardo Alves saw his

spot kick saved by goalkeeper Mohammadjavad Kia to keep the score at 2-1. Moments later, Aria Yousefi was shown a straight red card for a heavy challenge, though the decision was overturned to a yellow after another VAR review. Deep into stoppage time, Esteghlal Khuzestan conceded a second penalty. Alves stepped up again and calmly converted to seal Sepahan's 3-1 victory.

Shahdab, Sanatgaran Omid, Paykan win in Week 19 of volleyball league

Sports Desk

In Week 19 of the Iranian Premier Volleyball League, Shahdab, Sanatgaran Omid, and Paykan secured victories over their respective opponents, maintaining strong positions in the standings. According to IRNA, the match between Pas Gorgan and Shahdab Yazd took place on February 23

in the late Mohammadreza Yazdani-Khorram Hall. Pas Gorgan, who had delivered impressive results in recent weeks, won the first set 25-19. However, Shahdab responded with a more cohesive performance, taking the second set 27-25 to level the match. Shahdab continued their momentum in the third and fourth sets, winning

25-22 and 25-23, respectively, to secure a 3-1 victory. The first-leg encounter between the teams had ended with the same 3-1 result in favor of Shahdab. With this win, Shahdab reached 39 points, retaining their second-place position in the league standings. Meanwhile, at the Tehran Volleyball House, Sanatgaran Omid faced Esteghlal Gonbad. Sanatgaran

emerged victorious 3-1, marking their tenth win of the season and reaching 30 points. With Urmia Municipality resting this week, the team moved up to sixth place in the league table.

Esteghlal Gonbad, who had beaten Sanatgaran 3-1 in the first-leg match, managed to win only the third set 26-25 in today's game but lost the first, second, and fourth sets 25-22, 25-15, and 25-17, respectively. This defeat marked their fifteenth loss of the season, keeping them at the bottom of the table.

In another match at Shahid Bezaei Hall in Eslamshahr, Paykan faced Mehrگان Noor. Paykan won decisively 3-0, registering their twelfth victory of the season and reaching 34 points. Mehrگان Noor lost all three sets 25-22, 25-20, and 25-23, marking their eleventh defeat of the season.



Paykan players celebrating an important moment on the field.
 ● IRNA

A journey through time, love in Qasr-e Shirin



Khosrow Palace
● IRNA

Qasr-e Shirin
● yjc.ir

Sports Desk

In the westernmost part of Iran, where palm trees whisper in the wind and stones still remember tales of love, stands Qasr-e Shirin — a city where history, nature, and legend intertwine. From the silent grandeur of Khosrow Palace to the gentle murmur of water in Sassanid-era channels and the mysterious stillness of the Chaharghapi Fire Temple, Qasr-e Shirin invites every traveler on a journey through love, power, and beauty.

Milad Ataei, a journalist from Kermanshah Province, wrote in a recent column in chtn.ir that visiting Qasr-e Shirin is not merely a pas-

sage through geography; it is an entry into a story that began thousands of years ago and continues to this day. Situated at the border of Iran and Mesopotamia, the city has long served as a vital gateway for civilizations — a place where caravans paused, kings took residence, and love immortalized its name.

Khosrow Palace

Among all the historical treasures of Qasr-e Shirin, none illustrates the majesty of Sassanid architecture better than Khosrow Palace. Built during the reign of Khosrow II, the palace was not only a royal residence but also a symbol of one of the most famous love stories in Iranian history.

According to tradition, the palace was a gift from Khosrow to his beloved Shirin, whose beauty and influence have been immortalized in Persian literature. It is this story that gives Qasr-e Shirin its name — a palace for Shirin. Today, only the sturdy walls remain of the palace's former glory, yet even these ruins speak volumes about Sassanid architecture. Standing beside them, one can easily imagine vast halls, towering porticos, and lush gardens where the king and his beloved once walked. The silence here is not ordinary; it is a silence steeped in memory.

Sassanid water system

Another marvel of Qasr-

Shirin is the Sassanid water system — a network of channels and engineering structures that showcase the Sassanids' advanced understanding of water management.

These channels brought water from distant sources to the city and palaces, not only fulfilling daily needs but also irrigating royal gardens. In the heat of this land, water was life, and the sound of flowing water harmonized with birdsong and the gentle breeze. The system was more than a practical utility; it was a testament to the Sassanids' deep understanding of nature and their ability to harmonize human life with the environment.

Chaharghapi Fire Temple

Elsewhere in the region lie the remnants of the Chaharghapi Fire Temple, once a place where flames burned and worshippers gathered.

The temple's four-arched architecture is a beautiful example of Sassanid religious design. Beyond serving as a place of worship, it symbolizes the beliefs, faith, and worldview of a people who regarded fire as a sign of purity. Standing beside the temple, visitors feel a profound silence, as if the presence of ancient worshippers still lingers.

Palm groves

But Qasr-e Shirin is not a city of stone and history

alone; it is a city of life. The region's palm groves offer a strikingly different image of western Iran. Rows of tall, verdant palms create a landscape more reminiscent of southern Iran than the west. During the harvest season, golden clusters of dates hang like jewels among the leaves, bringing the groves to life. Walking among the palms is a soothing experience, where the wind dances through the fronds and shadows pattern the ground. The groves are not merely a natural attraction — they are part of Qasr-e Shirin's identity, demonstrating how humans and nature together have created a unique and vibrant landscape.

Qasr-e Shirin cannot be seen with the eyes alone; it

must be felt with the heart. Every corner of the city has a story to tell. The walls of Khosrow Palace still speak of love. The Sassanid channels still reveal human ingenuity. The Chaharghapi Fire Temple still whispers of faith. And the palm groves still breathe life. Perhaps the charm of Qasr-e Shirin lies in this combination: love and power, nature and history, silence and life. When the sun sets over the palm groves and shadows stretch across ancient walls, Qasr-e Shirin takes on another face — a face that seems lifted straight from legend. It is perhaps this very legend that draws every traveler back to the city, again and again.

Chakavir Canyon; Qeshm Island's natural wonder

Sports Desk

Chakavir Canyon, one of the natural marvels of Qeshm Island, captivates visitors with its towering rock walls, intricate erosional formations, and layered geological structures. Located in the southwest of the island near the village of Guran, the canyon is part of the Qeshm Geopark, the first geopark in the Middle East, which plays a crucial role in promoting and preserving the island's geological heritage. With its blend of visual beauty and scientific significance, Chakavir has become one of Qeshm's prime geotourism destinations.

The canyon lies approximately 90 kilometers from Qeshm and is accessible by car, followed by a walk along a dirt path. Visitors are advised to travel with a local guide or an experienced group, as the trails can be confusing and challenging. Nestled in pristine nature, Chakavir offers a tranquil setting, and its relative inaccessibility preserves its serene atmosphere, offering a unique experience for travelers, IRNA wrote.

Geologically, the canyon is composed of alternating layers of marl, limestone, and sandstone, reflecting millions of years of sedi-

ment deposition and climatic changes. These layers erode at different rates — softer layers wear away faster than harder ones — resulting in a variety of shapes along the canyon walls.

Two main forces have shaped Chakavir: water and wind erosion. During rainfall, water flows along natural channels, carrying sediment that carves deep grooves and corridors in the canyon floor and walls. Over time, natural pits and cavities have formed, some of which fill with water during the rainy season, creating striking and ever-changing scenery. Meanwhile, the island's strong and persistent winds act like sandblasting agents, sculpting smooth curves and intricate shapes in the rock. The combination of these processes produces tall walls with undulating lines, oval cavities, and artistic natural forms, each telling a story of geological and erosional processes.

One of Chakavir's most captivating features is the play of color and light on its walls. Under sunlight, the rock layers display shades from white to light gray and even darker tones. The interplay of shadows and uneven surfaces creates a spectacle that many visitors liken to a natural



● kojachetor.com

painting. Seasonal rainfall in autumn and winter enhances this effect, filling cavities and streams, making the canyon even more visually stunning.

The canyon's quietude adds to its allure. The only sounds are footsteps or the gentle flow of water, creating a meditative atmosphere appreciated by hikers, landscape photographers, and geotourists alike. Chakavir is not only a tourist attraction but also a natural classroom for geology enthusiasts. Its sedimentary layers and erosional features provide valuable insights into the



region's geological history, sedimentation periods, climatic changes, and geomorphological processes. For educational tours, the canyon offers a firsthand look at the effects of water and wind erosion, as well as natural dissolution and erosional patterns in limestone. Consequently, Chakavir is an important site for geotourism, geological education, and natural heritage preservation. Despite its beauty, the canyon is delicate. The rock walls and erosional formations are vulnerable to physical contact, graffiti, littering, and uncontrolled

visitation. Visitors are urged to follow sustainable tourism practices, avoid disturbing the rocks, stay on designated paths, and refrain from entering unstable areas. Awareness and education are key to preserving this natural wonder.

The best time to visit Chakavir is during autumn and winter, when temperatures are moderate, and seasonal rains enhance the canyon's scenery. Summer visits are challenging due to the island's intense heat and direct sunlight, making early morning or late afternoon excursions preferable. Rainy days and weather warnings should be avoided, as sudden water flows and slippery trails can be hazardous. Traveling with a local guide or experienced group improves safety and enhances the overall experience.

Qeshm Island, a premier natural destination in Iran, hosts a remarkable array of geological phenomena. Among them, Chakavir Canyon, though lesser-known, is gaining popularity for its unique beauty and geological significance. Alongside other geopark attractions like the Valley of Stars, Chahkooh Canyon, and Namakdan Cave, Chakavir offers a comprehensive glimpse into the island's natural and geological history.

Pezeshkian warns social polarization poses serious challenge to country



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (C) speaks during the 68th session of the Council for the Development of Qur'anic Culture in Tehran, Iran, on February 24, 2026.
● president.ir

Social Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian warned on Tuesday that deepening social polariza-

tion poses a serious challenge to the country, urging officials to prioritize economic relief, social justice and public trust. Speaking at the 68th session

of the Council for the Development of Qur'anic Culture in Tehran, Pezeshkian said the government's central focus remained improving household

livelihoods and easing pressure on families, adding that division and unfulfilled promises risk eroding social capital at a time of economic strain, president.ir reported.

His remarks come as policymakers grapple with persistent cost-of-living pressures and uneven service delivery, issues that have fed public dissatisfaction in recent years. By linking social cohesion directly to economic management and administrative conduct, the president signaled that restoring confidence hinges less on rhetoric and more on tangible improvements in governance and welfare outcomes. Pezeshkian criticized what he described as superficial engage-

ment with religious principles, arguing that ethical standards such as honesty, fairness and support for vulnerable groups must be embedded in day-to-day decision-making, budgeting and service provision. Failure to align policy with declared values, he said, widens the gap between public expectations and institutional performance.

He cautioned against making unrealistic pledges, saying that overpromising and underdelivering fuels disillusionment and weakens trust. "Hope is essential, but it must rest on honesty and realism," he said, stressing that senior officials bear primary responsibility for truthful communication.

Addressing recent incidents involving attacks on religious sites and public property, the president condemned acts of violence while acknowledging that some grievances stem from perceptions of discrimination and shortcomings in administrative

performance. Proper implementation of justice and equitable access to services would curb many such tensions, he said.

Pezeshkian added that mosques and community institutions should play a more active role in identifying and assisting households facing hardship, describing them as hubs of social solidarity rather than solely places of worship. The government would support initiatives that mobilize local capacity to address poverty and vulnerability, he said.

He also called for modern educational approaches to engage younger generations, saying ethical instruction must be accompanied by practical role models in public life.

"We did not assume office to command people, but to solve their problems," he said, adding that national solidarity and administrative competence were prerequisites for overcoming economic and social pressures.

Fajr Visual Arts Festival rolls out 170 events across 31 provinces

Water theme anchors festival to Iran's civilizational roots, minister says

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Abbas Salehi said on Tuesday that this year's Fajr Visual Arts Festival will center on water as a civilizational pillar of Iran, as the 18th edition opens today, in Shushtar, Khuzestan Province, with a nationwide program spanning all 31 provinces.

Salehi said visual arts carry a defined social mandate and must address tangible human concerns, IRNA reported.

Selecting water as the festival's central motif signals what he described as an artistic response to a national priority. In Iranian and Islamic tradition, he noted, water occupies a sacred and communal place, reflected in religious texts, folklore and ritual forms that have evolved over centuries.

This year's program places particular emphasis on public participation. Workshops dedicated to reconstructing traditional cultural symbols linked to water will run alongside exhibitions and urban interventions, under-



scoring the festival's shift towards community-based production. Organizers say the approach seeks to bridge professional art circles and local audiences, embedding contemporary practice in inherited forms.

Running under the banner 'My Homeland/Iran: Visualizing Water', the festival's water-focused strand is conceived as a long-term cultural initiative aimed at promoting responsible consumption and resource management. The symbolic opening on February 25 marks the start of a broader sequence of events planned over the coming months. The festival runs through March 3.

Saideh Arian, secretary of the 'My Homeland' section, said 31 provinces are staging

more than 170 artistic events as part of the festival. Each province is hosting five educational workshops led by artist-mentors, a showcase of workshop outcomes and ancillary visual arts programs linked to water culture.

The section has already commenced activities in 13 provinces, including Ardabil, Kerman (including South Kerman), Kermanshah, North Khorasan, Lorestan, Semnan, Hamedan, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Markazi, Yazd, Zanjan and Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari.

Arian said eight indigenous rain-invoking doll traditions are being revived through large-scale ritual figures, among them Katra Gisheh in Gilan, Buke Baraneh in Kermanshah, Kurdistan and Ilam.

Sepandarmazgan, ancient ode to women and the soil

Arts & Culture Desk

Long before heart-shaped candy boxes and red roses took over store windows, ancient Iranians were tipping their hats to women, life, and the living earth itself. On the fifth day of the month of Esfand, which falls around February 24, they marked Esfandegan, also known as Sepandarmazgan, a centuries-old festival that scholars have described as a celebration of "women and life." In historical texts, it was even called the "women's feast."

Today, the holiday barely registers on the public radar. But cultural historians say it deserves a second look, not as a nostalgic relic, but as a living thread that ties together nature, spirituality and the enduring status of women in Iranian culture. The name "Esfand" traces back to "Spenta Armaiti" in the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures. In that cosmology, Spenta Armaiti was a divine feminine figure, a guardian of the earth, a symbol of patience and devotion. In the spiritual realm, she embodied humility and wisdom; in the material world, she protected the soil, fertility and greenery. Earth wasn't just dirt underfoot. It was mother, steady, generous and life-giving.

The 11th-century scholar Biruni, in his book 'Athar al-Baqiya,' referred to the festival as the 'Feast of Women' and used another intriguing name: "Mozd-giran." Some modern analysts interpret that term as symbolically tied to women's rights, lit-

erally suggesting the "taking of wages," or receiving one's due. In that reading, Esfandegan wasn't just a feel-good holiday; it hinted at recognition of women's natural rights, the right to choose a spouse, a profession, a path in life.

That's a bold claim, and historians debate how far to take it. But what's clear is that women were front and center in the ritual life of the day. Historical accounts describe women dressing in their finest clothes, gathering in prayer and celebration, and holding bouquets of flowers. Some sources suggest the festival also honored unmarried young women, underscoring their place in communal life.

At home, the vibe was warm and unmistakably affectionate. Men gave gifts to their wives. Kindness flowed a little more freely than usual. If it sounds vaguely like Valentine's Day, cultural experts are quick to pump the brakes. They argue that Esfandegan and Valentine's differ in origin, philosophy and ritual. One grew out of ancient Iranian cosmology and reverence for the earth; the other from Western Christian tradition and medieval romance.

Still, most scholars see no need for a cultural tug-of-war. Every tradition that carries a human message of love and respect has its place, they say. The real issue isn't competition, it's amnesia. In recent decades, Valentine's Day has gained popularity among Iranian youth, while Esfandegan has large-



ly gathered dust. Cultural observers often point to a lack of sustained policy support and public programming around indigenous festivals. When homegrown traditions aren't actively introduced to new generations, they can quietly fade into the background.

That's why some experts are calling for a cultural reboot. Instead of pushing back against imported holidays, they suggest shining a brighter spotlight on Iranian celebrations such as Mehregan, the feast of friendship and covenant, and Esfandegan, the day of women and the earth. Not as museum pieces, but as meaningful touchstones that speak to contemporary concerns.

Those concerns are hardly abstract. Women today make up more than half of Iran's population. They are students, scientists, entrepreneurs, industrial workers and public servants, in addition to their foundational roles within families. Analysts argue that paying serious, structured attention to women's challenges and rights isn't just a social ob-

ligation, it's an investment in public health and social balance.

Even the culinary traditions of Esfandegan echo its themes of abundance and renewal. Historical sources mention a special soup known as "Ash-e Esfandi," sometimes called "Haft-daneh" or "seven seeds," made from a mix of grains and legumes, a symbolic nod to fertility and the promise of spring.

Because Esfandegan falls on the eve of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, it also carries the electric hum of seasonal rebirth. Nature is about to turn the page. Green shoots are poised to break through the soil. In that liminal moment between winter and spring, ancient Iranians chose to honor both the earth beneath their feet and the women at the heart of their homes. In a world that often moves too fast to look back, Esfandegan offers a reminder: sometimes the way forward begins by dusting off what we've forgotten.

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