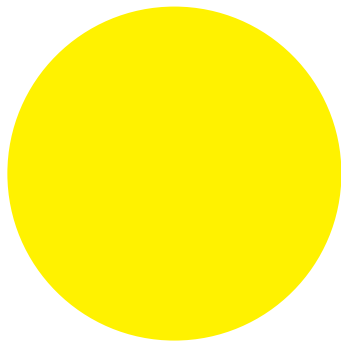


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President Masoud Pezeshkian (L) shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting in Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan, October 8, 2026. president.ir

Russia better positioned as messenger than mediator in Iran-US standoff

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

INTERVIEW

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian held talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Turkmenistan, with the Middle East’s worsening crisis among the issues discussed by the two leaders.

The Iranian and Russian presidents had previously met in September on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit. But what significance do such meetings have amid the deadlock between Iran and the United States? Ahmad Rashidinejad, a geopolitics researcher, told Iran Daily that such meetings do not lead to immediate progress on the nuclear issue, but Moscow can serve as a messenger, open up room for back-channel consultations and influence Tehran’s calculations.

IRAN DAILY: Given the deadlock in Iran-US negotiations and the growing risk of tensions, what significance does the upcoming meeting between the Iranian and Russian presidents in Turkmenistan carry? Can the meeting be expected to help create new avenues for easing tensions? RASHIDINEJAD: The meeting is important under the current circumstances, but expectations should be kept realistic. Its timing is significant: precisely as Iran-US negotiations have stalled and concerns are growing about a possible escalation, holding a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the CIS summit shows that Tehran and Moscow want to keep their communication channel active at the highest level.

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Pezeshkian: Iran will not leave negotiating table

Talks will only succeed without 'pressure, threats'



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (L) meets Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit and the Caspian Sea environmental summit in Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan, on October 8, 2026.
● president.ir

International Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian reaffirmed Tehran's commitment to diplomacy while firmly rejecting US unilateralism, telling Russian President Vladimir Putin that Tehran will not walk away from the negotiating table even as Washington continues its attacks. "We are engaged in dialogue; yet, every time we talk to the US, they launch new attacks. Nevertheless, we will not walk away from the negotiating table," President Pezeshkian said on Thursday evening when he met President Putin on the sidelines of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)

summit and the Caspian Sea environmental summit in Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan. "Proposals were exchanged, both from our side and from the Americans, and we have made our own revisions to them. Once finalized, we intend to sit down with the relevant intermediaries to consolidate and conclude the matter," Pezeshkian said. Pezeshkian also thanked Russia for its positions at the regional level and in the United Nations, as well as its role in checking the unchecked assertion of unilateralism. "Our goal is to end the conflict and ensure the rights of the Iranian nation are

respected within the framework of international law; however, if the US insists on pursuing a path of unilateralism, this will not be feasible," Pezeshkian stressed. The war started with US and Israeli attacks on Iran, while Washington and Tehran were locked in negotiations on Iran's nuclear program. The warring parties agreed a memorandum of understanding in June that spelled out a framework for a permanent resolution to the conflict, but the US violations of the agreement prompted a resumption of military operations. Negotiations have effectively been at an impasse since then, and recent indirect

talks between the US and Iran on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly failed to produce a breakthrough. Despite a hiatus in negotiations, exchange of messages and proposals through regional mediators are underway to end the war and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, a vital global energy shipping route.

According to Iranian officials, Tehran is reviewing a Washington's response to its recent proposal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, which was delivered to US officials during the 81st session of the UN General Assembly in New York.

Addressing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit on Friday, Pezeshkian said negotiations will only succeed without "pressure and threats".

"Negotiation conducted in the shadow of force is not negotiation, it is imposition and coercion," he said, warning that sanctions on Iran would affect "regional trade, connectivity, energy, and order."

The comments came as Pezeshkian on Monday said talks with the United States to end the war that began in late February were meaningless and only resulted in renewed attacks.

"With an enemy that every day resorts to assassination, sanctions, pressure and threats, and that breaks its commitments, negotiations are meaningless," he noted.

Leader hails Iran's police for standing firm against enemy's malicious blows



Ayatollah Seyyed Mojtaba Khamenei
● IRNA

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Mojtaba Khamenei hailed Iran's police force, FARAJA, as a key pillar of national security, saying its role has become increasingly prominent in recent years and calling for the force to be strengthened. In a message issued on the occasion of Police Week, Ayatollah Khamenei said security is among the most important divine blessings and praised the role of FARAJA personnel in maintaining security across Iran, from major cities and villages to the country's borders, mountains, forests and seas, Press TV reported. "Security, in its various dimensions of social and moral well-being and public comfort, is provided in society," the message said, adding that maintaining it across the country is "indebted to the courage and bravery of the devoted and hardworking forces of FARAJA as one of the solid pillars of the country's security." The message said the contribution of FARAJA has become more pronounced at different levels, "from command and staff ranks to police stations and outposts," and that signs of its impact became more visible during the second and third imposed wars.

It said the focus of the "criminal American-Zionist enemy" on striking different levels of FARAJA, "from the highest levels to its fingertips," has further demonstrated the importance of the institution. "But this futile effort and malicious

blows to the pillars of order and security in society, for which there is no precedent throughout history, did not cause the brave forces of FARAJA to retreat even an inch from their mission," the message said.

Ayatollah Khamenei said police personnel continued to perform their duties even when operating outside their usual locations.

The message said the police force's role extends beyond conventional law enforcement, adding its work contributes to social and moral security as well as public welfare.

The Leader also called attention to the sacrifices of police personnel, saying that their work could sometimes be taken for granted by members of the public.

"It is possible that many times the efforts and sacrifices of the guardians of security are taken for granted by some ordinary people, and it is precisely this state of being wronged and unrecognized that increases their reward before God," the message said.

"At the same time, the forces of FARAJA, who, like the Army and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, arise from the depths of society, can increase the people's trust in this valuable institution through trust-building behavior."

The message then turned to the modernization of the force, calling for comprehensive strengthening of personnel and technological capabilities.

Yemen's attacks on Riyadh's int'l airport claim three lives

International Desk

Saudi Arabia said on Friday that three people were killed including a pilot were killed in attacks on Riyadh's international airport, after Yemen's Ansarullah resistance movement claimed a series of attacks targeting the facility. The conflict between Ansarullah and Saudi Arabia has widened, with the resistance fighters staging repeated attacks on Saudi targets since they began a lightning offensive just across the border.

While seizing large swathes of territory along the Red Sea coast in Yemen, the Ansarullah has also attacked Saudi transport hubs, oil facilities and other civilian targets in the world's largest crude exporter.

The Saudi civil aviation authority said two attacks on Thursday on the Saudi capital's airport and a Saudia Airlines plane there "resulted in the martyrdom of three citizens".

Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni forces it backs have struggled to contain Ansarullah's advance, despite a counter-offensive aimed at recapturing territory including the area around the Bab al-Mandab strait that is crucial to global energy flows.

But a regional source told AFP on Friday that Riyadh would not bow to the Ansarullah's "military blackmail" and would not agree to a truce until the Saudi-backed forces regain all territory it has lost in recent weeks. The attacks forced diplomats stationed in the Saudi capital to shelter in



● AFP

place and international schools to take safety measures, as explosions echoed across the city on Thursday. The Ansarullah had already controlled the capital Sana'a and most of Yemen's major population centers since the start of the war in 2014. Riyadh's military coalition intervened to support the government the following year.

South African judge Navi Pillay wins Nobel Peace Prize

The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded Friday to South Africa's Navi Pillay, the judge who headed the Rwanda genocide tribunal and presided over a UN commission which accused Israel of genocide in Gaza – a laureate immediately blasted by Israel.

The 85-year-old has spent her career defending international law, which is under attack from wars and US President Donald Trump. Currently a judge on the International Court of Justice in a case where Myanmar also stands accused of genocide, Pillay has been "instrumental in ensuring that war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide are prosecuted," said Jorgen Watne Frydnes, the chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee in Oslo. Israel's Foreign Ministry said the award legitimized "anti-Israel hatred", and that Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels must be "applauding from hell". The daughter of a bus driver in a family of Tamil descent, Pillay served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2008-2014). Her career has taken her from South African



The 2026 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, South African lawyer and champion of international law Navi Pillay (C) poses for a photo after she gave a press statement on October 9, 2026 at the Courtroom 600 of Nuremberg's Palace of Justice.
● AFP

courts, where she defended anti-apartheid activists, to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the International Criminal Court.

"In historic international court cases, she has shown that legal measures can help prevent acts of war and violence," the committee said. Pillay's "independence, her expertise and steadfastness have made her one of the most respected international jurists of our time." She reacted to the news by making a quip about US President Donald Trump's well-documented desire to win the prize himself. "If you clap a little bit more I may

share this prize with Trump," the 85-year-old said during a standing ovation captured by Amnesty International Secretary General Agnes Callamard in Nuremberg and posted on the social network X.

Pillay headed the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI), which does not speak on behalf of the world body, and which last year found that genocide was occurring in Gaza.

Pillay told AFP at the time that her team had shared "thousands of pieces of information" with prosecutors at the International Criminal Court. Israel had categorically rejected the report's findings, slamming it as "distorted and false".



Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

CARTOON



Iraqi Airways resumes flights to Iran after months-long suspension



Economy Desk

Iraqi Airways resumed direct flights to Iran on Thursday after a months-long suspension triggered by the US-Israeli military campaign against Iran in late

February, Iraq's state news agency INA reported.

The airline will operate regular daily flights from Najaf International Airport to Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan, the Iraqi national carrier said, adding

that the resumption followed the completion of required legal and technical procedures, ISNA reported. The airline said the restart was made possible through the efforts of Iraqi Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi and Trans-

port Minister Wahab al-Hassani. The renewed services are intended to facilitate passenger travel and expand regional air links, particularly for religious pilgrimages, medical treatment and education.

According to Anadolu Agency, Iraqi Airways suspended flights to Iran in early March as a precaution after the US-Israeli war against Iran began on February 28. Iraq also closed its airspace as military tensions escalated across the region.

Flights on the Najaf-Tehran-Najaf route resumed on Thursday after a suspension of about eight months, while the return of the Iraqi carrier marks another step toward restoring international air services to Iran.

Iran's Civil Aviation Organization chief said in recent weeks that flights to many destinations previously served by Iranian airlines would resume following consultations.

Iraq had also closed Baghdad and Najaf airports to Iranian airlines following a new round of US sanctions targeting Iran's aviation sector. Iraq joined several countries, including the UAE, in enforcing restrictions on Iranian airlines after US Treasury Secre-

tary Scott Bessent said Iranian airlines would be "shut down" from September 16.

Iraq secured a waiver from US sanctions after its government held talks with Washington to seek an exemption from restrictions on Iran's aviation sector.

Javad Salehi Artimani, deputy for operations at Imam Khomeini International Airport City, told ISNA that flights to and from Najaf had been suspended on September 25 because of US sanctions. Iranian airlines resumed flights to Najaf on October 4 following consultations, and Iraqi Airways returned to Iran on Thursday, he said.

Iraqi Airways plans to operate seven weekly flights on the Najaf-Tehran-Najaf route, Salehi Artimani said, adding that the schedule would bring the number of daily aircraft movements to and from Najaf to more than 10.

The airport currently serves 30 destinations, he said, describing Iraqi Airways' return as a step toward the gradual restoration and expansion of international flights.

"Consultations are underway in this regard, and we will soon see other airlines return to the country," he said.

Iran's wheat output rises 18% to 16m tons, USDA estimates

Economy Desk

Iran's wheat production rose 18% to an estimated 16 million metric tons in the 2025/26 crop year, making it the world's 14th-largest producer, according to a US Department of Agriculture report on global grain production, Eqtasad-e Moaser reported. The estimate compares with 13.5 million tons produced in the 2024/25 crop year, which ended in September/October 2025. China ranked first globally with 141 million tons, followed by the European Union with 133 million tons and India with 121 million tons, the USDA data showed. Global wheat production was estimated at 822 million tons in 2025/26, down more than 2% from the previous crop



year. The report also estimated that Iran's barley production rose 16% to 3.5 million tons in 2025/26, up from 3 million tons a year earlier. Rice production, meanwhile, remained unchanged at 2 million tons. In August, Iran's deputy agriculture minister, Majid Anjafi, said the country had produced a record 14.1 million tons of wheat in the first six months of the current Iranian calendar year, which began on March 21.

"So far this year, for the

first time in history, we achieved wheat production of 14.1 million tons in the country, which is a significant figure," Anjafi said.

He described the agricultural sector's performance in producing essential commodities as highly successful.

According to Agriculture Ministry data, Iran produced nearly 11.7 million tons of wheat in the previous Iranian calendar year, of which the government purchased about 7.8 million tons under its guaranteed procurement program.

Tehran, Ashgabat seek to broaden regional electricity cooperation

Economy Desk

Iran and Turkmenistan have discussed extending their electricity import agreement, increasing power exchanges and developing transmission lines as Tehran seeks to expand regional energy cooperation, the head of Iran's Power Generation, Distribution and Transmission Company (Tavanir) said on Friday.

The talks took place during an Iranian delegation's visit to Turkmenistan, where President Masoud Pezeshkian attended a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Mohammad Allahdad said, according to the Energy Ministry's news service Paven.

The Iranian delegation, led by Transport and Urban Development Minister Farzaneh Sadeq and including the heads of the country's electricity and gas companies, met Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov to discuss bilateral energy cooperation, Allahdad said.

The main issues included extending the electricity import contract with



Turkmenistan, increasing power exchanges, developing the third and fourth electricity interconnection lines, and exploring the possibility of transmitting electricity through Turkmenistan to third countries.

The two sides reached preliminary agreements to continue examining the proposals, Allahdad said, adding that technical teams would assess their technical, economic and operational aspects.

He said the cooperation could create opportunities to increase electricity exchange capacity and strengthen regional energy ties, subject to the findings of expert assessments and the fulfillment of implementation requirements.

Iran has also opened the way for private companies to import electricity from neighboring countries to meet their energy needs.

Coordination has been completed for electricity imports from Iran's northern neighbors. Under existing contracts, Iran imports about 320 megawatts from Turkmenistan, equivalent to roughly 2 billion kilowatt-hours a year, and around 300 to 350 megawatts from Armenia, power industry spokesman Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi said in September. He described electricity imports as an important step toward meeting the country's energy needs.

Iran has also been negotiating with Turkey to secure electricity imports for its petrochemical industry after power plants supplying the sector were damaged during the 40-day war that began in late February.

The push to secure additional electricity supplies comes as Iran, which has faced energy shortages under decades of Western sanctions, seeks to address disruptions worsened by the conflict.

Russia better positioned ...

Recent remarks by Dmitry Medvedev about Moscow's readiness to mediate, along with his emphasis that Russia will not sacrifice its strategic relations with Iran for any other actor, reinforce this message. Putin has also kept on the table the proposal to transfer Iran's enriched uranium to Russia.

However, there is a serious limitation: Russia itself is involved in the war in Ukraine, and its credibility as a neutral party is in question. The main obstacle to the current deadlock is also the structural mistrust between Tehran and Washington, rather than the absence of a mediator. The US even distrusts Russia's role as a custodian of Iran's uranium. Therefore, this meeting will not lead to immediate progress on the nuclear issue, but it will likely cement Russia's role as a key player in the Iran dossier.

Given that Russia is currently involved in the Ukraine war and faces

a range of security and political challenges with the West, what role can Moscow play in managing the crisis between Iran and the United States? To what extent should Moscow's capacity and tools for influencing this process be taken seriously?

Under the circumstances of the Ukraine war, Russia can be more of a "communication channel," or at most an "actor influencing calculations," than an effective mediator. Moscow's capacity should be taken seriously, but not as that of a neutral mediator. Russia's main tools are several: its strategic relationship with Iran and access to decision-makers in Tehran; its permanent membership of the UN Security Council and veto power; proposals such as transferring Iran's enriched uranium to Russia; and its capacity to coordinate with China. But the limitations are also serious. The Ukraine war has turned Moscow into a party to the confrontation with the West and undermined its credibil-

ity as a neutral actor. There may therefore be concerns that Russia itself is under extensive sanctions and has an incentive to use the Iran dossier as leverage against the West, rather than necessarily seeking to resolve it. Thus, Moscow can carry messages, open up space for back-channel consultations and influence Tehran's calculations, but it is unlikely to emerge as an effective mediator in the short term.

Given Russia's role in nuclear developments and negotiations related to Iran in recent years, could Moscow, if any understanding is reached between Tehran and Washington, play a role in facilitating the implementation of the parties' commitments or establishing mechanisms to ease Iran's concerns about the other side's compliance?

Moscow can play a key role in the technical details of a nuclear agreement, particularly drawing on the

experience of Rosatom. However, the limitations are serious. Trump has explicitly said that until the Ukraine war ends, he does not welcome Russia's assistance on the Iran dossier. Russia itself is also engaged in a confrontation with the West, and its credibility as a neutral actor is in question. Moscow had previously even officially stated that it was not seeking to impose a mediating role on the parties.

To what extent can deepening Iran-Russia strategic cooperation and establishing more practical mechanisms to counter US pressure and sanctions help increase Iran's bargaining power?

Deepening strategic cooperation with Russia can increase Iran's bargaining power to some extent in the short term, but this increase is primarily tactical rather than strategic. The 20-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which took effect in October 2025, provides a framework

for cooperation in the energy, transportation, banking and military sectors.

The most important practical benefit is sanctions-evasion mechanisms: linking the Shetab payment systems, trade in national currencies, and the North-South Corridor, which can help steer Iran's trade routes away from Western bottlenecks. In the military sphere, intelligence and drone-technology cooperation raises the cost of any military adventurism against Iran. However, important considerations must be taken into account. The treaty is not a defense pact and does not contain a "mutual defense" clause. Therefore, Iran cannot count on automatic Russian military support in the event of a conflict. On the other hand, Russia has important shared interests with parties involved in tensions with Iran, including Israel and the Persian Gulf states, and these considerations effectively limit Moscow's room for maneuver.

On the ground in Haiti

Growing war zone facing US deportees

**By Sam Vigersky**
*International affairs fellow
at the Council on Foreign
Relations*

PERSPECTIVE

I returned to Port-au-Prince on a muggy morning in June, 14 years after I was last in Haiti as a UN aid worker responding to the country’s 2010 earthquake. In the days that followed, I saw a city hollowed out by years of deliberate and indiscriminate armed conflict. Gangs had fortified neighborhoods that I had once freely driven through in my Toyota 4Runner. Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected police vehicles were posted at intersections in the few pockets where the government still had a presence. At a Doctors Without Borders (MSF) hospital in the Cité Soleil neighborhood, the cement was still drying on a 70-foot protective wall that was built after a recent gang battle left the facility littered with stray bullets.

With gangs now controlling the large majority of Port-au-Prince — up to 90 percent by some estimates — even the senior security officials tasked with stopping them are not safe. Days before I arrived, gang members dressed in police uniforms kidnapped James Boyard, inspector general of the Haitian National Police, along with his wife and their six-year-old daughter, a US citizen. The parents’ errand that morning was one most people wouldn’t think twice about: taking a sick child to the doctor after a restless night. In Haiti, it’s now a life-and-death gamble.

Henry Wooster, chargé d’affaires at the US embassy in Haiti, called the situation “full-scale urban warfare” when testifying before the Senate Committee on Appropriations in February. That language matches the State Department’s own assessment: Haiti is under a Level Four “Do Not Travel” advisory given the risk of crime, terrorism, and kidnapping.

But in late June, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Department of Homeland Security and allowed the Trump administration to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians, a humanitarian program allowing migrants whose countries are considered unsafe to legally reside and work in the United States. Up to 350,000 Haitians, who have been protected under TPS since Haiti was designated for the program after the devastating 2010 earthquake, can now be deported back.

The Trump administration’s actions acknowledge that the removal of these humanitarian protections is at odds with the security situation on the ground. The US government is pushing an aggressive counter-gang offensive within Haiti itself. Built around a 5,500-troop, UN-authorized Gang Suppression Force that effectively has a license to kill, the campaign has surged security personnel and resources into the country. The administration has also indicated it plans to collaborate with a lethal drone operation in Haiti run by former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince’s private military company, Vectus Global.



Gang Leader Jimmy Chérizier (C) patrols the streets with gang members in the Delmas 3 area in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on February 22, 2024.
● GILLES CLARKE/GETTY IMAGES

Missing from the strategy, however, is a humanitarian surge to match. I saw the consequences of this imbalance firsthand: a humanitarian response less than half funded, even as violence drove displacement to record highs. After the earthquake response 14 years ago, I remember thinking Haiti could not get worse. But in 2026, it has.

A country in freefall

The World Food Program (WFP) helicopter carrying me into Port-au-Prince touched down on an improvised dirt helipad carved into the downslope of a ravine, in the leafy suburb of Pétiön-Ville — a lily pad of tenuous security and luxury comforts. After landing, the helicopter never cut its rotors. Passengers hustled off and on in under 10 minutes while an armed guard kept watch.

Our landing zone was just a few hundred paces from the Karibe Hotel, home to the WFP Country Office and its permanent staff. The travel method was not one of convenience, but the result of a Federal Aviation Administration ban on US flights below 10,000 feet over Haiti. The policy decision came after gangs opened fire on three commercial aircraft at Toussaint Louverture International Airport in November 2024, wounding a Spirit Airlines flight attendant.

At the start of my trip, I visited a WFP cash distribution site serving people recently displaced by gang violence in Cité Soleil, a densely packed urban slum that stretches along the western edge of Port-au-Prince. Its 34 neighborhoods have been balkanized by generations of gang control.

Under a high noon sun on the grounds of a fire department compound, I watched as hundreds of displaced people patiently rotated through a circuit of lines. Over the hum of conversation, a young woman in a neon-green staff polo used a bullhorn to corral people through registration sign-ins and benefit card checks. Eventually, enve-

lopes of emergency cash — 15,600 Haitian gourdes, or around \$120 — were pulled from boxes, counted by hand in front of each recipient, and handed over to those recently displaced from Cité Soleil.

Twenty-five-year-old Jean Wadline was one of them. The mother of a seven-year-old son and expecting her second child later this year, Wadline fled Cité Soleil after days of armed clashes erupted in mid-May. Through an interpreter, she described how two gangs began fighting in her subsection of the neighborhood. Then, for no reason, one of them set fire to her block.

She ran. It happened so fast, Wadline left with nothing — not even her identification card. Thankfully, she said, her son was in school that day.

At first, she stayed with friends. But the arrangement eventually became untenable, and she was asked to leave. Now, Wadline sleeps on the floor of a school classroom with 50 other displaced people, where hanging sheets divide the room into smaller pods for modest privacy. As she described the conditions in which she and her family were living, she began to cry.

Wadline explained how she has taken on debt to buy food. Most of the WFP cash assistance in her hand — made possible through the US State Department’s humanitarian funding — would go toward paying back the money she owed. What’s left would buy uncooked spaghetti and rice.

Her story is devastatingly ordinary: nearly 17,500 other Cité Soleil residents were displaced during the single gang battle that took her home in May. Many other neighborhoods in the capital have suffered the same fate.

Satellite imagery shows the scale of the destruction. The pictures below show the neighborhood of Solino in Port-au-Prince in 2021 and 2025, with buildings collapsed or missing their roofs as a result of gang violence.

Over the last four years, 1.5 million peo-

”

With gangs now controlling the large majority of Port-au-Prince — up to 90 percent by some estimates — even the senior security officials tasked with stopping them are not safe. Days before I arrived, gang members dressed in police uniforms kidnapped James Boyard, inspector general of the Haitian National Police, along with his wife and their six-year-old daughter, a US citizen. The parents’ errand that morning was one most people wouldn’t think twice about: taking a sick child to the doctor after a restless night. In Haiti, it’s now a life-and-death gamble.

ple have fled their homes due to gang violence, amounting to 12 percent of the population, according to the International Organization for Migration’s Displacement Tracking Matrix.

The forces driving that displacement accelerated after the July 2021 assassination of president Jovenel Moïse. In the wake of his death, 26 gangs tightened their grip on the country, and in early 2024, the largest of them united into a single coalition called Viv Ansanm (“Live Together” in Haitian Creole). The group is led by former police officer Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier. The United States is offering a \$5 million bounty for information leading to his arrest.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime found that Viv Ansanm, like other gang coalitions in the country, sustains itself through transnational criminal networks, armed largely by a surge of high-caliber, military-style weapons trafficked from the United States. Gangs deploy violence strategically — to “extract rents, expand influence, contest authority” — and recruit liberally. Roughly half of Haiti’s gang members are now children, in what the United Nations considers one of the worst child protection crises in the world.

In a nation already plagued by hunger, the gangs have turned food into a weapon of war, cutting off farmers from their markets and populations from food stocks. For those who are hungry, gangs use food as a tool of recruitment. Erwan Rumen, deputy country director for WFP in Haiti, recounted how gang control in Cité Soleil had placed nearly 20,000 people in famine conditions when he arrived in 2023. Urban famine in the capital of a country is extraordinarily rare; in Haiti, it reflected not an absence of food so much as an absence of access. Today, more than half the population faces acute food insecurity.

Mass casualty plans

One of Port-au-Prince’s few health facilities that is still standing, for now, is the privately run Fontaine Hospital Center in Cité Soleil, where staff and patients fled the same mid-May outbreak of violence as Wadline. Founded in 1991 by Jose Ulysse, Fontaine is a lifeline for 300,000 people living in what has become a near-total health-care desert.

While walking through Fontaine’s courtyard, Ulysse recounted how the entire hospital scrambled to evacuate as gunshots grew louder and closer on May 10. It was the second time in two months they had been forced to do so. Eleven newborns in the intensive care unit were cradled out of the second-floor ward and into an improvised caravan of cars as caregivers tried to keep oxygen flowing. Eight of the hospital’s maternity patients were transferred to the MSF Cité Soleil hospital down the road; some gave birth that night. None would stay long.

That same morning, Max Kowalski, MSF’s acting field coordinator at its Cité Soleil hospital not far from Wadline’s torched home, woke up hearing the stuttering drumbeat of machine guns getting closer. The wildfire of violence was within 200 meters (about 660 feet) of his facility.



The satellite imageries of the neighborhood of Solino in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 2021 and 2025 show the scale of the destruction, with buildings collapsed or missing their roofs as a result of gang violence.
● AIRBUS & VANTOR

“When the fight is close,” he said, “you’re expecting [trauma] patients.” Sitting behind the desk in his prefabricated office, Kowalski described the violence like a farmer might explain crop cycles. The gangs fight hard for three or four days. Then they retrieve their dead and organize burial ceremonies. About a month later, once munitions have been restocked, the intense firefights start again. The World Health Organization reported that only 37 of the capital’s 100 inpatient health facilities remain functional two years after the gangs consolidated power.

The gang battle that sparked on May 10 was particularly intense, however. And so, by 9:00 a.m. that morning, Kowalski made a fateful decision: activate MSF’s Plan Blanc, a contingency operation that involves emptying out the hospital in anticipation of an imminent mass casualty event. The Plan Blanc ensures beds are available for a wave of trauma patients. The risk, Kowalski said, is that you clear the facility, bring additional staff in through armed conflict, and nothing happens. Depending on the outcome, he joked, you look clairvoyant or like an idiot. But Kowalski is a 15-year MSF veteran with five postings in Haiti alone. He trusted his instincts and began making calls: more doctors and nurses, more crowd control, more watchmen. Every person coming into the hospital, and every evacuee, would need security coordination to navigate the gun battle outside. It was a dangerous proposition: in March 2025, while staff evacuated MSF’s Turgéau Emergency Center in Port-au-Prince, four of MSF’s vehicles were intentionally fired upon despite prior coordination with Haitian authorities. Tessier told me that police often suspect ambulances of doubling as escape vehicles for gang members evading arrest. And medical staff would need to plan for more than just gunshot wounds: dangerous conditions meant people would drive more recklessly, causing road traffic accidents; civilians hazardingly evacuating on motorcycles might be hurled off after hitting a pothole too fast. By 10:00 a.m., the first wave of gunshot victims flooded in; within hours, the number rose to 10. By that evening, there were more than 40 gunshot wounds, all for a hospital with only five emergency room beds. Often, doctors didn’t know who they were treating; two rival gang members and a police officer could have been in the same room. Somehow, the team managed to stabilize patients and transfer those in critical condition to larger hospitals for more complex surgeries. But then, in the waning hours of daylight, a wave of more than 800 terrified civilians from Cité Soleil appeared at the hospital compound’s perimeter entrance. Most were physically unharmed — they were simply desperate for shelter after hunkering down for the hours-long gun battle. At the first sign of a lull, they ran for their lives to find protection overnight from the gangs. One by one, each was checked for weapons before coming inside. By morning, Kowalski said, all were gone. Considering the violence of the prior 24 hours, there was no prospect of continuing services. MSF suspended operations the following day. MSF’s outpatient department sees an average of 150 patients per day. Its third suspension of services in three years, however brief, only increased the demands on the few remaining facilities in Port-au-Prince — most of which are on the “verge of collapse,” according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. The head of the Red Cross’s mission in Haiti, Amélie Chbat, put a finer point on it last fall: “the entire health-care chain is disintegrating” with open centers being flooded with gunshot wounds, victims of sexual violence, and severely malnourished displaced people with no access to essential services. With two Cité Soleil hospitals suspended in an already crumbling health-care chain, patients must travel farther and across more gang territory to reach medical care, and they must wait longer to receive it as the network’s catchment zones swell. The risk is so great, many will forgo care altogether. Through the window of the Land Cruiser, I watched a theater of urban warfare



A person walks amid debris on September 25, 2025, in the Delmas 30 neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, which was attacked by gangs in late 2024 and early 2025.
● CLARENS SIFFROY/APP

pass by. Husks of burned cars, felled metal billboard poles, and mountains of debris had been hewn into crude barricades. Electric wires had been cut. Burned-out buildings and houses were everywhere. An old Ministry of Health hospital in the neighborhood had been abandoned after gangs intentionally ran cars through it and pillaged its supplies.

Lethal drones and a gang suppression force

Haitian security forces pushed gangs out of several Port-au-Prince neighborhoods between late 2025 and February 2026. But many gangs regrouped in the Plaine du Cul-de-Sac, the corridor carrying commercial traffic to the capital’s container port and oil terminal, then turned on the gangs already there. The offensive against the gangs changed the control of the city geographically, but it only increased the violence on the streets. The United Nations recorded 2,444 homicides in Haiti between December 2025 and February 2026, a 23 percent increase over the previous three months. The waves of fighting that followed, from March through July, are the ones that burned Wadline’s block and emptied Kowalski’s hospital. Cleared from one pocket of the city, the gangs hollowed out what livable space was left in another. It is indisputable that a new international strategy toward Haiti is needed, but the Trump administration is effectively reimagining the approach to the country’s security through a set of tangled objectives: cutting aid to Haiti, deporting Haitians back to it, and pushing forward on a military intervention to stabilize it. These moves raise new fears that a period of fighting could pick up just as Haitians deported from the United States arrive in the country. To support its plans for military intervention, the United States advanced a UN Security Council resolution in September 2025 that created a 5,500-member Gang Suppression Force (GSF) for Haiti, replacing a failed Kenya-led mission — the latest chapter in a cycle of foreign intervention and disengagement that has shaped Haiti’s instability for over a century. The GSF is not a traditional peacekeeping operation; rather, it is a counter-gang operation overseen by a Standing Group of Partners, chaired by the United States, and composed of voluntary troop commitments and funding contributions from member states. Colonel Justin Gorkowski, who co-leads the US Department of Defense’s Haiti GSF Tiger Team, has described the new approach as a counterinsurgency operation: clear, hold, build. Ten countries will contribute troops to the GSF, including three key battalions dedicated to gang-controlled departments: Chad in West (metropolitan Port-au-Prince), Sri Lanka in Artibonite, and Ivory Coast in the Center. The issue, of course, is the sheer scale required to bring this strategy to life. In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Gorkowski explained the simple math needed to stabilize the country. US planners estimate needing 30,000 security personnel to secure a population of 11.9 million, using a standard formula for peacetime security of 2.8 law enforce-

ment personnel for every 1,000 civilians. The situation in Haiti today is far from a peacetime scenario, however, and could be compared more closely to a counterinsurgency operation. During the Iraq War, the United States used a counterinsurgency formula of 20 law enforcement personnel for every 1,000 civilians. But Haiti is a long way from 30,000 security personnel. For 2026, the United States forecasts a combined force of 10,000 Haitian National Police and Armed Forces of Haiti. The number is projected to increase to 19,000 in 2028. By the following year, Col. Gorkowski told Congress that Haiti will have “some numbers” close to a peacetime ratio of security forces that will be needed. This still leaves a gaping chasm between the ambitions of the US strategy and the ability to execute it by securing territory where civilians can safely live. And security force numbers are only half the problem. During the winter offensive, Haitian security forces dismantled a criminal network that included five of their own — national police officers who had been supplying a gang with escorts, weapons, and ammunition as it ran kidnappings. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has indicated that it intends to work more closely with Vectus Global, the US private military company led by former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince, to address the country’s security challenges. Haiti originally turned to the group in March 2025, with Prince characterizing his work there as “the definition of mercenary, no question”. During an August 2025 Wall Street Journal interview, Prince said he had a one-year security contract with the Haitian government, which includes Salvadoran mercenaries, to help the Haitian National Police deploy off-the-shelf drones loaded with explosives. Prince has set a straightforward benchmark for the group’s success: “when you can drive from Port-au-Prince to Cap-Haïtien in a thin-skinned vehicle and not be stopped by gangs.” That possibility seemed distant during my visit. National Route 1, the critical artery running north-south out of the city, remained under gang control. It is unclear how this offensive is improving security in Port-au-Prince and Haiti

“One more hospital offline, one more community stranded without help, one more wave of patients headed across conflict lines to the few health centers left standing. A few days after I left, the Supreme Court ruled that Haitians formerly protected by TPS could now face deportation. When President Donald Trump’s deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, was asked whether the country they’d be returning to was safe, he didn’t hesitate to respond. “For Haitians?” Miller said. “Absolutely.”



An individual enters Hôpital Universitaire de la Paix in June 2026. A prominent sign outside reads: “Do not enter the hospital with a weapon.”
● SAM VIGERSKY/CFR

overall, or achieving US strategic goals. Between March 2025 and January 2026, drones piloted by Haitian security forces and private contractors have killed at least 1,243 people — including 43 civilians and 17 children — according to a Human Rights Watch report. The gang leader Barbecue’s Port-au-Prince stronghold was bombed by drones in January to no effect. He remains at large, and no major gang leader has been captured or killed. The Haitian security official, James Boyard, and his daughter are still held by the gangs, despite the payment of several ransoms. His wife’s status has not been reported at the time of writing. In the meantime, the gangs are taking new ground through mass violence. On August 23, 150 heavily armed gang members stormed Kenscoff, a rural community in the mountains above Port-au-Prince and Pétion-Ville that serves as a key transit route in and out of the country’s capital. Under the cover of night, gangs massacred 47 people, dozens of them who had taken refuge in a Protestant Church, with another 52 people kidnapped.

A puzzle of no-fail decisions

In a world with no shortage of humanitarian emergencies and record-breaking conflict, I asked MSF’s Tessier why Haiti’s crisis is so difficult. Armed conflict, government collapse, natural disasters, mass displacement, and famine are the metrics by which MSF calibrates its response posture all over the world, he said. But not only are these all present in Haiti, they are all present in Port-au-Prince, a city covering just about 14 square miles. And, in the past year, the conflict has expanded to include rural regions of the country that were once considered safe. “Gangs make alliances, then break them,” Tessier said. MSF and others are constantly recalibrating, triangulating information by the minute, attempting to keep pace in Haiti’s landscape of rival gangs, the GSF, the Haitian National Police, and Vectus mercenaries. The stakes are life-and-death, for patients and the aid workers themselves. Sitting with aid workers in Port-au-Prince who had previously deployed to war zones in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza, and Sudan, I asked how those environments compared to Haiti. They told me that their experience 700 miles off the coast of Florida was as harrowing and complicated as any they had faced. It was also as rewarding as any. The intellectual challenge of deconflicting and navigating across the battlefield — a puzzle of no-fail decisions — can still, most days, be solved, they said. MSF’s skills are what allow its people to maneuver in a war zone with only white cloth vests and unarmored vehicles. It was one of the few glimmers of hope remaining in a country so decimated by violence and hunger, disease and displacement: workers extraordinarily courageous and agile, trusted and empowered to protect their patients and each other. And yet, for all their heroics, the health system keeps deteriorating, displacement keeps climbing, gangs keep terrorizing the capital and pushing into the countryside, and donor money keeps drying up. Disease surveillance will soon go with it, according to the Pan American Health Organization. As my WFP helicopter carried me out of Port-au-Prince, Tessier and MSF issued a press release: Maternité Isaïe Jeanty, an MSF-supported maternity hospital in the Chancery section of Cité Soleil, was forced to suspend operations following five days of fighting. The hospital was only down the road from the Delmas mobile clinic we had visited the day before. One more hospital offline, one more community stranded without help, one more wave of patients headed across conflict lines to the few health centers left standing. A few days after I left, the Supreme Court ruled that Haitians formerly protected by TPS could now face deportation. When President Donald Trump’s deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, was asked whether the country they’d be returning to was safe, he didn’t hesitate to respond. “For Haitians?” Miller said. “Absolutely.”

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Iranian clubs face flight restrictions, hectic schedule on return to Asian action

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League trio Esteghlal, Tractor and Gol Gohar are facing an additional challenge ahead of a congested run of domestic and continental fixtures, with new restrictions on Iranian airlines threatening to complicate their travel arrangements as they resume action in Asian club competitions this week.

The restrictions could force the clubs to reconsider how they reach their destinations, potentially turning what were previously straightforward journeys into lengthy, multi-stage trips involving overland travel and connecting flights.

The problem extends beyond away fixtures. With all three clubs also scheduled to play designated home matches in neutral countries, even games in which they are technically the hosts require international travel.

Clubs may have to consider several alternatives, including travelling overland to

a neighboring country before boarding a flight, flying from Iran to a transit hub such as Turkey and continuing to their destination, or combining ground transportation with multiple flights.

Such arrangements would not only increase travel time but could also disrupt training schedules, recovery periods and preparations for subsequent matches. Esteghlal face a particularly challenging run of fixtures, with eight matches reportedly scheduled across a 30-day period.

The Tehran Blues, who played out a 1-1 away draw against Tractor in the Iranian top flight on Thursday, are due to travel to Qatar to meet Al Gharafa in the AFC Champions League Elite on Monday. They will then host Gol Gohar on October 18 and visit Chadormalou four days later in Yazd.

Their schedule continues with an away match against Shabab Al Ahli in Dubai on October 27, followed by a designated home fixture in the



continental competition against Qatar's Al Shamal SC in Basra on November 3.

With domestic and continental commitments coming in quick succession, any additional travel could significantly reduce the time available for recovery.

The difference between a direct flight and a journey involving several hours on the road, border formalities and

connecting flights could prove decisive in determining how well Esteghlal prepare for their next assignment.

Tractor face similar difficulties. The Tabriz-based side will play Al Shamal in Muscat on Monday before returning for a domestic league match against Malavan in Bandar Anzali next Saturday. Tractor will then travel to the United Arab Emirates to face Al Ain

on October 26, followed by another trip to Muscat on November 2 for a continental fixture against Uzbekistan's PFC Neftchi.

The schedule leaves little room for lengthy journeys between matches.

The challenge is particularly significant because the club must complete an international round trip for a nominally home match before

returning to domestic competition.

Gol Gohar, representing Iran in the AFC Champions League Two, also face a demanding sequence of matches across several countries. The club are scheduled to meet Bahrain's Muharraq on Wednesday in Seeb, Oman, before returning to domestic action against Esteghlal in Tehran.

The team will then face

Kheybar on October 25, followed by a designated home match against Turkmenistan's Arkadag in Tajikistan three days later.

The Sirjan-based outfit are due to play Sanat Naft in Abadan on October 31 before travelling to Turkmenistan to face Arkadag again on November 4.

Their itinerary could require repeated journeys between Iran, Bahrain, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, alongside domestic trips to Tehran and Abadan.

Under normal circumstances, additional travel time might be manageable. However, the combination of a congested schedule and uncertainty over flight connections makes the situation considerably more complicated.

Every extra stop, border crossing or ground transfer could eat into the limited time available for rest and preparation.

The difficulties facing the three clubs also present a challenge for Iran's league organizers, who must coordinate

domestic fixtures with the Asian Football Confederation's continental competitions while accounting for the practical realities of international travel.

A gap of three or four days between matches does not necessarily provide sufficient preparation time if a team must undertake a lengthy, multi-stage journey between them. The situation is particularly unusual for designated home matches abroad, when clubs must travel internationally despite nominally enjoying home advantage.

Any intervention would require the organizers to balance the domestic calendar, AFC commitments and the teams' actual travel requirements. For the three clubs, the immediate challenge is no longer limited to preparing for their continental opponents. They must also find a way to reach their matches without sacrificing too much of the recovery time needed to compete across an increasingly demanding schedule.

Sports Desk

Iran's aquatic sports squad returned from the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games without a medal despite national records, individual swimming finals and a fourth-place finish in water polo, highlighting both signs of progress and the persistent gap between the country's athletes and the continental podium. The campaign offered a mixed picture. Swimming ended a 16-year wait for an Iranian finalist in an individual event, diving produced the country's best individual result at the Asian Games since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the water polo team reached the last four for the third consecutive edition.

However, none of the three disciplines managed to secure a medal, raising questions about whether the progress made in Nagoya can translate into podium finishes at future major competitions. Swimming provided some of the most encouraging developments, as Homer Abbasi reached the final of the men's 50m backstroke, while Amir Motaei qualified for the finals of the 50m and 100m breaststroke.

Abbasi broke Iran's national record in the 50m backstroke heats, while Motaei improved the national mark in the 50m breaststroke on his way to the final.

Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games:

Iran makes strides in aquatics but finishes empty-handed



Their achievements represented a significant step forward for Iranian swimming, which has struggled to challenge Asia's leading nations for years.

Nevertheless, reaching the final was not enough to contend for a medal. National records are important indicators of progress, but they must also be assessed against Asian and world standards. Breaking an Iranian record does not necessarily mean an athlete is close to the podium. A more clearly defined development strategy is therefore needed, with measurable performance targets for the 2030 Asian Games, regular international competition and structured training programs designed to close the gap. Develop-

ing young swimmers to challenge established athletes would also be essential to sustaining progress.

Diving offered another encouraging sign, with Sam Vajir and Mohammad Moqaddasi reaching finals in several events. Vajir finished fourth in the men's 1m springboard, delivering Iran's best individual diving result at the Asian Games since the Islamic Revolution. The pair also placed fifth in the 10m synchronized platform and reached the final in the 3m synchronized springboard.

The results suggested that Iranian divers are moving closer to the continental elite. However, a limited pool of top-level athletes and insufficient exposure to high-quality

international competitions remain significant obstacles.

In leading diving nations, elite athletes regularly compete against strong domestic and international opposition, gaining technical experience and learning to handle pressure. In Iran, preparation has often relied heavily on training camps, leaving athletes with fewer opportunities to test themselves against the best in Asia.

Water polo, meanwhile, presented the most pressing questions. Iran reached the semifinals for the third consecutive Asian Games but again failed to secure a medal, having won bronze at Jakarta 2018 before finishing outside the podium at Hangzhou 2022.

After losing 12-8 to China in the group stage in Nagoya, Iran suffered a semifinal defeat against Japan before meeting China again in the bronze-medal match. The Iranians lost 13-9, finishing fourth once more.

A defeat against Japan was perhaps unsurprising given the strength of the Japanese team, one of Asia's leading water polo nations. However, the second loss to China raised questions about Iran's ability to adjust tactically between meetings with the same opponent.

Reaching the semifinals consistently demonstrates that Iran remains competitive at the continental level. Yet repeated fourth-place finishes also suggest that maintaining a place among the top four is no longer sufficient.

The federation must conduct a thorough assessment of the team's performance, identifying tactical shortcomings and areas requiring improvement rather than simply seeking individuals to blame.

Overall, Nagoya was neither a complete failure nor a major breakthrough for Iranian aquatic sports. Swimming and diving showed encouraging signs, while water polo maintained its place among Asia's leading teams.

The next challenge is to turn those encouraging performances into tangible results.

Asia Pacific Deaf Athletics Championship:

Iran bags 12 medals, finishes runner-up in team standings

Sports Desk

Iran collected 12 medals, including five golds, to finish as runner-up in the team standings at the Asia Pacific Deaf Athletics Championship in Penang, Malaysia.

clocking 56.47 seconds in the final.

Mahdi Vahidian and Yazdan Eslami added two silver medals to Iran's haul, finishing runner-up in the men's 200m and shot put, respectively.

Hashem Yadegari, meanwhile,



Elaheh Golmohammadi secured the country's sole medal in the women's competition, claiming gold in the discus throw with a best effort of 35.21 meters in the final.

Ali Alizadeh was the most successful Iranian across three days of action at Batu Kawan Stadium, settling for silver in the men's 1,500m before claiming the top prize in the 800m final. Amirhossein Zare' won gold in the men's discus throw with a best attempt of 46.97 meters, while Yashar Vaqar raced to gold in the men's 110m hurdles.

Iran's fourth men's gold medal came in the 400m, where Tarouq Abiyat shattered the Asian record on his way to victory,

Iran's Tarouq Abiyat poses with his new Asian record after winning gold in the men's 400m at the Asia Pacific Deaf Athletics Championship in Penang, Malaysia, on October 8, 2026.

● APDSC

claimed two bronze medals in the men's 100m and long jump before teaming up with Vahidian, Vaqar and Abiyat to finish third in the 4x100m relay.

The Iranian quartet of Alizadeh, Vahidian, Mohammad-Mahdi Zare' and Mehran Sarafraz also settled for bronze in the men's 4x400m relay.

The championship was part of the eight-day Asia Pacific Deaf Multi-Sport Championships in the Malaysian city.

Khorasan Razavi's carpet industry faces growing challenges

Iranica Desk

For generations, handwoven carpets have been an integral part of the lives, culture and economy of families across the cities and villages of Khorasan Razavi Province, where generations of weavers have worked at their looms. For many rural women and families, carpet weaving has not only helped preserve a cultural heritage but has also provided a source of income and livelihood. Today, however, this long-standing tradition faces a range of economic and structural challenges that threaten its future.

Mostafa Zaboli, a veteran handwoven carpet weaver in Khorasan Razavi Province, said rising raw material costs, declining economic returns, the entry of inexperienced workers into the trade and waning interest among young people in learning the craft were among the main challenges facing the province's carpet industry.

Unless weavers' economic circumstances improve, he warned, it would be unrealistic to expect younger generations to continue working at the looms and pass the craft on to future generations.

Zaboli told ISNA that rising raw material prices were

among the most pressing problems facing carpet weavers today. Yarn, wool and other weaving materials account for a significant share of production costs, and price increases directly affect both the final cost of carpets and the income earned by weavers.

Labor costs have also risen, pushing up production expenses. However, the market cannot absorb price increases indefinitely, and producers cannot raise their prices without considering consumers' purchasing power, he added.

Under these circumstances, producers face a difficult choice: raise prices and risk losing customers, or cut costs by using cheaper raw materials, potentially compromising the quality of their products.

Zaboli identified the entry of unskilled and inexperienced individuals into the trade as another challenge, stressing that carpet weaving is a specialised profession that requires proper training before work begins. Weavers must understand raw materials, know which types of yarn and wool are suitable for different carpets, follow designs accurately and observe the technical principles of weaving. Without these skills, carpet quality may deteriorate, ultimately damaging the



reputation of handwoven products, he said.

The issue becomes particularly significant when carpets are sold in competitive markets, where customers assess quality before making purchasing decisions. If standards decline, producers cannot expect to retain buyers' trust, Zaboli added. He also expressed concern over declining interest among young people in carpet weaving, saying the profession's economic prospects were no longer attractive enough to draw new entrants as they once did.

Young people today seek jobs that offer predictable

earnings and a clearer financial future. When carpet weaving requires months of labor and considerable effort but generates income that fails to keep pace with living costs, it is hardly surprising that they turn to other occupations, he said. Zaboli warned that a decline in carpet weaving would mean more than a reduction in production. It could also undermine employment among rural households and lead to the loss of traditional knowledge and skills associated with the craft.

For carpet weaving to survive into future generations, the economic conditions of weavers must first improve,

he said, adding that those who have devoted years to mastering the craft should be able to earn a living from their skills.

Seyyed Mehdi Hashemi, a researcher specializing in handwoven carpets, said the industry's problems could not be attributed to economic factors alone. One of the most significant challenges in recent years has been the declining number of weavers and diminishing incentives for people to work in the sector.

When carpet weaving is no longer economically viable, workers gradually leave the profession. However, the industry depends not sim-

ply on labor but on skilled and experienced artisans, he said.

Over years of practice, experienced weavers develop an intricate understanding of designs, colors, yarn, wool, knot density and quality. Such expertise cannot be acquired in a short period. Consequently, the departure of experienced weavers represents more than a shrinking workforce; it also risks the loss of accumulated knowledge and craftsmanship, Hashemi said.

He described the simultaneous departure of skilled artisans and the entry of inexperienced workers lacking sufficient knowledge as a serious threat to the industry. As experienced workers leave and less-qualified individuals take their place, carpet quality can gradually decline, he warned.

Hashemi said authenticity, diversity and quality had been key factors underpinning the standing of Iranian carpets in domestic and international markets.

In previous years, attention to designs, patterns, dyeing techniques and production quality had helped strengthen the industry's market position. Maintaining that standing, he added, would require continued planning and careful oversight.

The researcher identified the use of suitable raw ma-

terials as a fundamental principle of high-quality carpet production, noting that appropriate wool, quality dyes and adherence to technical weaving standards all contribute to a superior product.

Manufacturers should not sacrifice the quality of raw materials simply to reduce production costs, he said.

Emphasizing that the carpet market depends above all on trust, Hashemi said customers' confidence rests on a product's quality, authenticity and technical characteristics.

Preserving the authenticity of traditional designs and motifs is another important concern, he added. The carpets of each region form part of its cultural identity, and patterns developed over generations should not be abandoned merely to cut costs or speed up production.

However, preserving tradition does not mean ignoring market demand, Hashemi said. Carpets must retain their cultural identity and traditional characteristics while also adapting to changing consumer preferences.

Today's customers may seek different sizes, colors, designs or even uses for carpets. Producers, therefore, need to understand both the heritage of their craft and the market and its customers' needs, he said.

Telesm Cave captivates visitors, frightens locals

Iranica Desk

High on Mount Manesht, in Sarab-e Eyvan Rural District in Ilam Province, lies Telesm Cave, a site long associated with fear and folklore. With its winding passages and intriguing local legends, the cave has become one of Ilam Province's most enigmatic natural attractions — a place many mountaineers prefer to admire from the outside.

For years, Telesm Cave has been surrounded by strange local beliefs about lights mysteriously going out and visitors falling ill. The stories have turned the cave into one of the province's most mysterious natural sites. But do these legends have a basis in reality?

The cave stretches approximately 300 meters from its entrance to its deepest known point. The first 100 meters are open, while the remainder runs beneath a ceiling covered with stalactites. At a depth of about 100 meters, the cave branches into three passages. One of these extends for around 20 meters but becomes extremely narrow and difficult to traverse after the first 10 meters.

Beyond this challenging section, the cave continues in a semi-circular formation to a depth of approximately 200 meters. From around the 260-meter mark onward, the passage narrows further, with part of the route having collapsed.

The cave is composed primarily of limestone, while its floor con-



sists of a mixture of soil and rock. It was identified in 1990 by the Ilam Mountaineering Association in cooperation with the tourism affairs department of the provincial Department of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Local beliefs surrounding the cave are so deeply rooted that even its name, Telesm, has become associated with these stories of mystery and enchantment.

Mohsen Karimi, a resident of Sarab-e Eyvan, told ISNA that the cave is "strange and magical," claiming that most people who enter it eventually become ill.

He also said the cave is a refuge for animals including snakes, owls, bats and scorpions, adding: "As soon as you enter, any source of light goes out for no apparent reason."

According to Karimi, bats accompany explorers near the cave's entrance. Some hang upside



down from the cave's formations, while others fly at a height close to visitors' faces. Limestone formations and a floor covered with soil and rocks are among the cave's other notable features. Farzad Sharifi, director general of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization of Ilam



nation: the accumulation of carbon dioxide in enclosed and deep sections of caves.

"In limestone caves, particularly in deeper areas where ventilation is insufficient, carbon dioxide — which is heavier than air — can accumulate near the floor or in lower layers," he said. "Studies conducted in similar caves have shown that at carbon dioxide concentrations of around three percent, lamp flames can go out because there is no longer enough oxygen to support combustion."

Sharifi noted that in some caves around the world, entering areas with high concentrations of carbon dioxide can cause torches to go out within seconds.

He added that carbon dioxide accumulation can also cause dizziness, shortness of breath, extreme fatigue and even unconsciousness. Such symptoms, he said, may explain local accounts

of visitors "falling ill" after entering the cave. Prolonged exposure in the deeper sections can make these symptoms more severe.

Telesm Cave was officially registered as a national natural heritage site in 2020. The designation recognizes the site's importance from a conservation perspective. However, reports indicate that access to the cave remains difficult and hazardous, and plans have been discussed to restore the route and make access easier.

Sharifi said that, on the one hand, Telesm Cave is not suitable for general tourism because of genuine hazards, including potentially dangerous animals, bats, possible carbon dioxide accumulation and sections affected by rockfalls. On the other hand, he said, the cave is one of the province's officially registered natural attractions and, if properly managed, could become a destination for adventure travelers and geotourism enthusiasts.

Although partly rooted in fear and a lack of scientific understanding, local stories may nevertheless reflect the cave's real hazards: limited ventilation, potentially dangerous wildlife, and passages that become progressively darker and more difficult to navigate.

The scientific explanation for carbon dioxide accumulation offers a rational account of both phenomena at the heart of the legends: the extinguishing of lights and the illness experienced by some visitors.



Iranian documentary wins two awards in Russia with story of woman seeking her roots



Arts & Culture Desk

An Iranian documentary about a nomadic woman's struggle to

regain her sense of belonging after leaving the mountains for city life has won two awards at a Russian film festival, includ-

ing the audience prize, in its first festival appearance. "My Name Is Kabutar", directed by Arman Gholipour Dashtaki,

received the Grand Prize for Best Film and the Best Film Audience Award at the 26th Flahertiana International Documentary Film Festival in Perm, a city in western Russia.

The film follows Kabutar, a Bakhtiari nomadic woman who left her mountain life and moved to a city but continued to feel unsettled, despite having access to urban amenities. Her story centers on her attempt to reconnect with her identity and the land where she and earlier generations had lived.

Gholipour Dashtaki told IRNA on Friday that he first met Kabutar while making his documentary "Chamoon" during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their friendship continued after filming, and he later learned that she had been forced to abandon nomadic life and move to a city. The director said his own experience helped him understand

her feelings. After spending about 20 years in large cities for education and family reasons, he returned to his birthplace, where he has lived for around 13 to 14 years.

He said the film was not intended to portray city life as bad or to suggest that urban amenities were unimportant. Rather, it explored identity, belonging and the emotional ties people maintain with their ancestral land.

The response from audiences was particularly striking. Gholipour Dashtaki said some viewers cried during the film's two screenings and later explained that Kabutar's story had reminded them of lives they had left behind and people who were no longer with them.

Some viewers said they had more comforts in their lives today but had been unable to regain what Kabutar was seeking by returning to her former world, he said.

The film was made independently, with the director

paying the costs himself after the project received no specific financial backing despite being presented at a national documentary event organized by the Iranian Youth Cinema Society and later at the "Partab" event run by the Center for the Development of Documentary, Experimental and Animation Cinema.

Production took two years, with the team spending days in the mountains alongside nomadic communities. The work was complicated by a lack of electricity and limited access to even basic mobile phone services.

Gholipour Dashtaki said the audience award was especially meaningful because viewers in Russia had connected with the story of a woman living thousands of kilometers away. The film's first public screenings were at Flahertiana, and he hopes it will evoke a similar response among Iranian audiences at the upcoming Cinema Vérité festival.



Arman Gholipour

'Her Eyes': A narrative of technical, emotional maturity in santur playing



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

'Her Eyes' is among those solo santur performances whose value cannot be measured merely by the level of speed, the number of mallets, the complexity of passages, or the technical difficulty of the phrases. In this performance, technique has reached a stage where it is no longer meant to show itself off to the listener, but rather has become a tool for conveying musical expression. This point may perhaps be the most important characteristic of Amirhossein Raoufi's playing: moving away from technical display and reaching a stage where technique serves the phrase, motif, timbral color, emotion, and emotional weight.

In 'Her Eyes,' the first thing that draws the listener's attention is the astonishing mastery of the player over the mechanics of the mallets. The santur is an instrument in which, unlike bowed or plucked string instruments, the player does not have direct and continuous contact with the sound source, and this very issue makes control over expression difficult. The mallet must, within a fraction of a second, both find the precise location of sound production, control the intensity of the strike, regulate the distance between notes, and preserve its independence of movement within fast structures. This becomes more complex when consecutive patterns of darab, takyeh, passages, and speed-oriented figures are accompanied by changes in position.

What is heard in Raoufi's playing is what I call a kind of "automatization of technique." That is, a stage at which the player's nervous-motor system has become so deeply inte-

grated with the performance pattern that the mind no longer has to consciously issue a command for every movement of the mallet. At such a level, the nerves and muscles have memorized the movement patterns, and the player can devote a major part of their mental capacity to music, to phrasing, tension and release, the architecture of the melody, and the transmission of emotion.

This characteristic is particularly important in 'Her Eyes,' because the work is not merely a collection of difficult phrases. Its motifs and figures have character and play a role in creating the emotional atmosphere of the work. Raoufi does not use technical figures as independent decorative elements; rather, he integrates them into the melodic structure. For this reason, a darab or a rapid passage is not merely heard as a display of skill, as though the player were trying to show off to santur players, but as a logical continuation of the phrase.

From the perspective of santur technique, one of the notable points in Raoufi's work is the control of the independence of the two hands. This independence does not merely mean the ability to perform two different patterns simultaneously. The more important issue is maintaining the rhythmic and dynamic identity of each hand within a unified texture. Such an approach can also be traced in his other works.

This background shows that Raoufi's approach to the santur is fundamentally not that of a merely technique-oriented player. He makes use of the instrument's multilayered capacity to create texture. The formation of the "Duo Tayi" with Hamid Forouzan is also noteworthy in this direction. A project that began during their student years at the Faculty of Music of the University of Art and focused on the capacities of santur

duets.

Another important aspect of Raoufi's playing is his understanding of the santur's limited but extremely subtle expressive possibilities. Pashang Kamkar, regarding "Bākhvat-e Khishtan," has referred to the difficulty of performing vocal nuances, tahrir, ghalt, malish, and vibrato on the santur, while also considering Raoufi's performance in the Nava mode noteworthy because of his use of higher bridges and the fourth position, varied phrasing and tahrirs, and fidelity to the logic of the radif.

This point is also important for understanding 'Her Eyes.' Raoufi does not seek to conceal the acoustic limitations of the santur, rather, he turns them into part of his personal language. Control over the intensity of the strike, the point at which the mallet lands, the degree to which the mallet rebounds after striking the string, the time interval between two strikes, and even the amount of resonance remaining from the previous note all contribute to the formation of his expression. In advanced santur playing, it is precisely these details that distinguish a merely accurate performance from one possessing a distinct identity.

On the other hand, in 'Her Eyes,' a kind of technical economy can also be observed. Wherever it is possible to achieve the same musical result with a simpler movement, the player does not necessarily resort to the most complicated movement. Complexity enters where it has expressive necessity. This is precisely the point at which technique is transformed from a "display of ability" into a "musical language."

Raoufi's artistic path in recent years also confirms this approach. In his newer works, including "Ranjgah" and "An Dast-ha," an emphasis on elements of Iranian music can still



Amirhossein Raoufi

be seen, alongside an effort to move away from repeating established patterns of santur playing. Sharif Lotfi, the musician and founder of the Faculty of Music of the University of Art, has described the performance of these two works as "a new idea in the academic path of Iranian music" and emphasized avoiding "repetition upon repetition."

From this perspective, 'Her Eyes' can be seen at a point in Raoufi's artistic path where technique and expression are moving toward a serious balance. Speed, the brilliance of the mallets, consecutive darabs, breath-taking passages, and rapid movements of the hands, although striking at first glance, derive their true value elsewhere: in motifs that carry a 76% emotional weight, in phrases that breathe, and in figures that, rather than interrupting the flow of music, move it forward.

In fact, technique is the player's greatest asset, but it is also their greatest danger. A player who is still struggling with technique is inevi-

tably forced to think about passage after passage while performing, but a player who has moved beyond technique can think about the musical meaning of that same truth while performing it. In 'Her Eyes,' Raoufi approaches this stage in many moments, where the hands do their own work and the mind is free to guide the music.

Perhaps this is why listening to this solo performance is not merely an encounter with a fast and difficult performance, but rather an encounter with a player who has taken years of practice beyond the level of training muscles and mallets and brought it to the training of a "musical response." At such a level, a darab is not merely a passage, and speed is not merely speed. All of these are components of a language. A language that, in 'Her Eyes,' attempts to establish a balance between academic discipline, the technical possibilities of the santur, and the emotional expression of Iranian music.