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Members of the Iranian team pose for a family photo with a national flag inset with a backpack to honor Iranian schoolkids killed in a US missile strike in February, after winning six gold medals at the 2026 Open World Astronomy Olympiad in Russia, on November 14, 2026.
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Can China's robot industry help address Iran's demographic challenge?

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

FEATURE REPORT
EXCLUSIVE

China has been investing considerable time, resources and funding in developing robots designed to perform tasks traditionally carried out by human workers. A growing number of companies are entering the field, seeking to bring robotic labor into everyday life and commercial activities.

Travelling around China, it is increasingly common to encounter such technologies in different settings.

In Wuxi, international journalists were introduced to Puying Data Technology Co. Ltd., a company that supplies standardized data, or the "fuel" for algorithm development and iteration. The company plans to deploy 300 humanoid robots to collect data across domestic, office and consumer environments.

The robots are being trained to perform various tasks, with the aim of bringing them to the market over the next five years to take on jobs currently performed by humans.

In Shanghai, Hi-Dolphin Robot Technology specializes in intelligent service robots and is best known for its autonomous coffee-making machines. The company has already deployed robotic cafés in more than 70 countries, serving customers at airports, commercial centers and corporate campuses with fast and consistent beverage preparation.

Witnessing these developments naturally raises questions about the implications of replacing human labor with robots, particularly the potential loss of jobs and the unemployment challenges that could follow, concerns reminiscent of those that accompanied the Industrial Revolution.

While many people are impressed by the technology and welcome the convenience of receiving services from robots, concerns about the future of employment remain widespread.

Nevertheless, the expansion of robotic labor appears to be an increasingly difficult trend to reverse. Much like the Industrial Revolution, technological advances are likely to reshape the labor market, making adaptation more practical than resistance. Workers will need to acquire new skills and prepare for occupations that complement emerging technologies rather than compete directly with them.

Governments, educational institutions and civil society also have a responsibility to raise awareness, facilitate retraining and prepare people for a changing employment landscape.

Robots' role in demographic challenges

For a country like Iran, however, the rise of robotic labor presents another perspective: its potential role in addressing an increasingly pressing demographic challenge.

Iran is heading toward a significant shift in its population structure, with the share of older people expected to rise substantially in the coming decades.

The country's fertility rate has fallen sharply, from more than six children per woman in the 1980s to an estimated 1.6–1.7 in 2025–2026, well below the replacement level of 2.1. This decline, combined with increasing life expectancy, is accelerating population aging. The United Nations Population Fund has identified Iran as one of the countries experiencing the fastest rates of population aging.



Robots are trained to perform tasks in domestic, office and consumer settings at Puying Data Technology Co. Ltd. in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China, on October 29, 2026.
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The consequences extend well beyond changes in the population's age structure. A shrinking working-age population could create serious labor shortages, while a growing number of retirees would place additional pressure on pension funds, healthcare services and other social support systems. The challenge will be to maintain economic productivity and provide adequate care for an increasingly older population with a relatively smaller workforce.

Government incentives and public awareness campaigns have so far struggled to reverse the declining birth rate. Although encouraging family formation and childbirth remains important, demographic trends take time to change. Even if fertility rates rise, it will take years before larger birth cohorts enter the labor market. Iran therefore needs to consider complementary measures to prepare for the workforce challenges ahead.

One option is to attract foreign workers, as several countries facing similar demographic pressures have done. However, immigration is not without challenges. Managing large inflows of foreign labor requires effective integration policies, social services and regulatory oversight. Differences in language, culture and social practices can also create integration challenges if not properly addressed. Immigration can help ease labor shortages, but it cannot be treated as a solution without considering its broader social and economic implications.

Another option that deserves greater attention is the use of robots to perform an expanding range of jobs.

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