

Iran's Prosecutor General Mohammad Movahhedi Azad Has Announced That His Office Has Filed Two Criminal Cases Over the Atrocities Committed by the Israeli Regime

# IRAN NEWS

President Masoud Pezeshkian Has Congratulated Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the Arab Country's National Day

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## 2 DOMESTIC

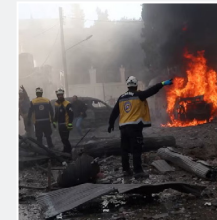


### Target of \$900m in Engineering and Technical Services Exports to Central Asia

> SEE PAGE 2

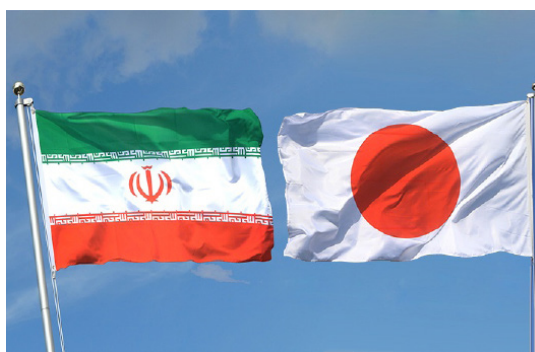
## 3 INTERNATIONAL

### Russian, Syrian Jets Intensify Bombing of Syrian Rebel Territory



> SEE PAGE 3

### Japanese Support for Iran in FATF Issue



TEHRAN - The 41st plenary meeting of the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism (EAG) was held in Indore, India, from November 25 to December 5, 2024. The meeting saw the participation of a delegation from the Islamic Republic of Iran as an observer member.

Hadi Khani, the Deputy Minister of Economy, Secretary of the Supreme Council for Combating Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing, and head of Iran's National Financial Intelligence Unit, led the Iranian delegation at the event. In an exclusive interview, he provided insights into Iran's participation and outcomes from the meeting.

Around 200 representatives from various countries, including India, Belarus, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as experts from international organizations such as the United Nations, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), attended the five-day session.

The focus of the discussions included anti-money laundering (AML), illegal transactions, terrorist financing, and cybercrimes. Among the key topics were methods of money laundering, the use of cross-border money transfers for illicit activities, strategies for financing terrorism, and existing regulations to combat these issues.

The meeting also discussed the potential threat of cybercrimes in financial sectors, including the use of digital currencies, professional money laundering operations, proxy accounts, and strategies to counter these challenges. There were also discussions about creating a unified mechanism for assessing terrorist financing and cryptocurrency transactions that contribute to terrorism.

Iran achieved several positive results from the meeting, including agreements with regional partners in the fight against money laundering. Notably, Iran agreed to collaborate on improving technical and legal compliance with FATF standards through the support of the Eurasian Group. Iran also engaged in fruitful talks with officials from Japan and India.

In a bilateral meeting with Mitsutoshi Kajikawa, the Deputy Minister of Finance for International Affairs in Japan, Iran and Japan discussed collaboration on money laundering and terrorism financing. Kajikawa expressed Japan's support for Iran's efforts to normalize its situation within the FATF framework, promising assistance in presenting Iran's case to the G7 countries.

### Iran Will Support Syria Against "U.S.-Israel Plot"



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A former chief commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says the United States and the Israeli regime provoked Takfiri terrorists into invading and occupying the Syrian city of Aleppo to expand the war from Lebanon and Gaza into Syria.

Major General Mohsen Rezaei, who is currently a member of Iran's Expediency Council, made the remarks in a live interview with Al Jazeera news network on Sunday.

He said Wednesday's surprise assault on Aleppo by foreign-backed terrorists was "a major political mistake" that violated the 2020 ceasefire deal between the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Takfiri militants.

"We consider the occupation of Aleppo the result of provocation by Israel and the United States, especially at a time when Israel has been doing its best to destabilize the region over the past year through its military campaign and bombing of Gaza and Lebanon, as well as repeated airstrikes on Syria," he added.

"This action is an extension of the war on Lebanon and Gaza to Syria, and [thus] we support Syria, and its government and army." Iran was the first country to rush to Syria's aid following the 2011 outbreak of foreign-sponsored violence there.



### Iran Warns of Spread of Syria Insecurity

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Spokesman Ismail Baqaei highlighted the growing concerns over security instability in Syria and emphasized that the repercussions of this crisis extend far beyond Syria's borders. He stressed that the current instability poses a threat to the entire region, urging a collective international response to mitigate its spread.

Baqaei opened the briefing by updating the press on the Iranian Foreign Minister's diplomatic engagements over the past week. The minister participated in the "Civilizations" conference in Portugal, meeting with foreign ministers from Algeria, Tunisia, Spain, and others. Baqaei noted that discussions on regional developments, particularly in Syria, were a focal point of these meetings. He also mentioned that Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, had visited Syria and would be heading to Turkey shortly. These visits were aimed at addressing the active resurgence of terrorist groups in the region and the urgent need for coordinated international action to counter such threats.

As part of Iran's ongoing diplomatic efforts, Baqaei pointed out that a key regional meeting of foreign ministers from the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) would take place in Mashhad on December 5. Iran continues to emphasize the importance of international cooperation in managing the security challenges in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon, which are escalating due to terrorism and humanitarian crises.

When questioned about the United States' involvement in Syria, Baqaei criticized Washington's presence, arguing that the U.S. occupation has contributed significantly to the prolonged instability in the country. He noted that while the U.S. claims to be in Syria to combat ISIS, the continued presence of terrorist groups raises questions about the effectiveness of this intervention. "The U.S. military presence in Syria is an illegal occupation," Baqaei asserted, highlighting the contradiction between the U.S.'s stated goals and the ongoing presence of ISIS and other extremist factions in the region.

Baqaei also addressed Iran's diplomatic missions in Syria, particularly the activities of Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, who recently visited Syria and Turkey. The mission's primary objective was to reinforce Iran's support for Syria's sovereignty and to assess the latest developments in the country. Baqaei stressed that regional countries, including Turkey, should work together to combat terrorism and prevent the further destabilization of the region.

Regarding Iran's nuclear program, Baqaei reaffirmed that Iran's stance on nuclear issues remains unchanged. He explained that while Iran is ready to engage with European countries and adhere to international conventions, such dialogue must be rooted in mutual respect and genuine commitment from all parties. Baqaei's comments followed recent discussions in Geneva, which were not limited to nuclear concerns but addressed a wide range of regional issues, including the situation in Gaza and Syria.

On the subject of the recent attack on the Iranian consulate in Aleppo, Baqaei assured that no staff members were harmed, as the consulate had been evacuated in a timely manner. He emphasized that any assault on diplomatic missions is unacceptable and should be addressed by

### Araqchi Vows Iran's Full-Fledged Support for Syria in Anti-Terror Fight

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says Tehran will insist on its principled stance to fully support the Syrian government, nation and army in the fight against terrorism and safeguard regional security and stability.

Araqchi, who arrived in Damascus at the head of a diplomatic delegation, made the remark in a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on Sunday.

The meeting came a few days after terror outfits led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched their largest assault in Syria in years and took control of parts of the country's second-biggest city, Aleppo, and advanced southward toward the city of Hama.

The Syrian army announced later that it thwarted the large-scale terrorist operations through a preemptive strike.

The Iranian minister conveyed warm greetings from Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and President Masoud Pezeshkian to the Syrian president and nation.

He said the recent terror acts in Syria are part of a plot hatched by enemies of stability and security in the region.

Such incidents also expose that the terrorists' sinister goals are in line with those of the United States and the Israeli regime which seek to spread warmongering and insecurity in the region and make up for the Zionists' failures in the face of the resistance front, he added.

The top Iranian diplomat expressed confidence that Syria, like in the past, will also this time manage to defeat terrorist groups.



He reaffirmed Iran's full support for Syria to counter acts of aggression by the Israeli regime and terrorist groups.

Speaking to reporters before his departure, the Iranian foreign minister said Iran makes no distinction between the Israeli regime and the Takfiri terrorists.

"We believe that following the Israeli regime's failures, the enemy is trying to implement its sinister goals of spreading insecurity in the region via these same terrorist groups," the top Iranian diplomat emphasized.

The Syrian president expressed his appreciation for the support of the Iranian government and nation and sent his greetings to Ayatollah Khamenei and President Pezeshkian.

Assad commended Iran's strong stance on support for the stability and security of the countries in the region, particularly Syria, in their battle against the vicious phenomenon of terrorism.

He urged all regional countries to make all-out efforts to eradicate terrorism, saying only the enemies of Muslim countries, especially the Israeli regime, are benefiting from the scourge.

Assad hailed the Iranian foreign minister's meaningful visit to Syria under the current sensitive circumstances which shows Iran's message of support for the countries of the resistance front in the face of the Israeli regime.

Meanwhile speaking upon his arrival in Turkey's capital Ankara after a visit to Syria, Araqchi said Takfiri terrorist groups in Syria made a miscalculation by launching their ongoing assault on the Arab country's army positions.

### Joint Efforts, Convergence Among Muslim Nations Key to Preventing Spread of Terrorism



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says Muslim nations must promote convergence and make joint efforts to prevent the spread of terrorism in the region, particularly in Syria.

In a phone conversation with Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia' al-Sudani on Sunday, Pezeshkian said unity among Muslim countries will help Syria in its fight against terrorist groups.

Pointing to the recent resurgence of Takfiri terrorism in Syria, he added, "Such incidents are part of the Zionist regime's sinister plans to spread insecurity, discord and conflict among Muslim countries."

He emphasized that Iran's regional strategy is based on protecting territorial integrity of countries such as Syria.

"Under the circumstances that the region was moving towards relative peace following the establishment of a ceasefire in Lebanon and attention was focused on Gaza, recent events in Syria raised serious concerns about regional security," Pezeshkian pointed out.

He expressed Iran's readiness for any type of cooperation with the purpose of combating terrorist moves and maintaining security in the region.

Terror outfits led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allied terrorist factions launched on Friday their largest assault in Syria in years and took control of parts of the country's second-biggest city, Aleppo, and advanced southward toward the city of Hama. However, the Syrian army announced later that it thwarted the large-scale terrorist operations through a preemptive strike.

On Sunday, Russian and Syrian warplanes targeted militant positions in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib to repel an offensive by foreign-sponsored Takfiri terrorists.

Speaking to Iranian lawmakers earlier on Sunday, President Pezeshkian called on Muslim countries to intervene in the Syrian crisis regarding the resurgence of Takfiri terrorists and not allow the United States and Israel to exploit the internal conflict in the Islamic Arab country.

### Hundreds of Takfiri Terrorists Killed in Syrian Army's Attacks near Aleppo, Hama



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Hundreds of the Takfiri terrorists have been killed in Syria as the army is pressing ahead with its anti-terror operation.

Reporting on Monday, Syria's state television said around 320 more terrorists had been killed in the countryside of the cities of Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama.

The death toll took to some 1,300 the number of the Takfiris, who have been killed as a result of joint cooperation between Syrian and Russian forces, since last week, when the terrorists began trying to stage resurgence in the Arab country's northern areas.

Detailing the operations, the Syrian television said Syrian and Russian air forces had struck gatherings of terrorists and their ringleaders in the vicinity of the al-Hamadaniyah sports complex in Aleppo Province, killing and injuring a large number of those who had been targeted.

The official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) said dozens more terrorists were also killed and wounded near the city of al-Safira to the east of Aleppo during similar joint airstrikes.

According to Syria's al-Thawra newspaper, a group of Takfiris, meanwhile, invaded Zughba village in Hama's suburbs, only to be ambushed by the villagers, who confronted and killed all of the attackers.

The Syrian forces also destroyed as many as 63 armored personnel carriers and other military vehicles belonging to the terrorists, besides shooting down one of their drones over the city of Masyaf, west of Hama.



### Iran Successfully Secures Removal of Israeli Regime From UIC Int'l Conference

TEHRAN (IRNA) - In a significant diplomatic move, the Israeli regime has been excluded from participating in the International Union of Railways (UIC) conference, following a formal request by the CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways. Jabarali Zakeri, CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways, requested the exclusion of the Israeli regime from the UIC Middle East Railway Conference in Turkey. Zakeri's action was in response to Israel's alleged crimes, including genocide and violations of human rights. Zakeri stressed that Iran's firm stance on the issue led to the removal of the Israeli regime from the conference. The Iranian position, advocating for the exclusion of Israel, was clearly communicated to the organizers, and with the support of most participants, Israel was barred from attending the international event.

### Shiraz, a Safe and Significant Hub for Tourism and Investment



TEHRAN - The Australian Ambassador to Iran, Ian McConville, emphasized the safety and investment potential of Iran and Shiraz for international tourists, countering travel warnings issued by foreign governments.

In a meeting with the deputy mayor of Shiraz, McConville shared his positive experiences from a family visit to Shiraz in 2017. He highlighted the region's agricultural potential as a key area of interest.

"Shiraz is a major center for tourism, and many Australians are familiar with it," McConville stated. "Tourism and agriculture present great opportunities for collaboration between Shiraz and Australian cities. The safety of Iran and Shiraz for tourism is well-established."

McConville noted that Shiraz is celebrated among Australians for its literary heritage, particularly the works of renowned poets such as Hafez and Saadi. He praised Shiraz's active participation in international arenas and acknowledged similarities with Australian cities that are members of global historical city alliances.

This meeting marked the first official visit by Australian Embassy representatives to Shiraz in recent years, which McConville described as a starting point for fostering bilateral cooperation between Shiraz and Australian cities.

Despite Shiraz's rich attractions, McConville pointed out the relatively low number of foreign tourists compared to its potential. He attributed this to travel warnings issued by some foreign governments, but reiterated that Shiraz is a safe destination. He expressed hope that such engagements would lead to increased visits by Australian tourists.



### Target of \$900m in Engineering and Technical Services Exports to Central Asia

TEHRAN - The Director General of the Knowledge-Based and Engineering Services Office at the Trade Development Organization of Iran announced that the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade (Ministry of Industry) has set a target of \$4 billion for the export of technical and engineering services by 2025. Of this, approximately \$900 million is aimed at Central Asian countries.

In a report from the Trade Development Organization of Iran, ahead of the Iran Project exhibition in Uzbekistan (Tashkent) and with an emphasis on the importance of this market for Iran's export development program, a consultation meeting was held today to discuss various aspects of exporting technical and engineering services, including oil, gas, petrochemicals, water, electricity, energy, and construction. The meeting was attended by Mohammad Reza Karimzadeh, Director General of the Knowledge-Based and Engineering Services Office of the Trade Development Organization of Iran.

Karimzadeh emphasized that Iran's commercial relations with Uzbekistan are special, noting that the Ministry of Industry oversees the Joint Commission between the two countries, which has been a key factor in giving special attention to this market.

Referring to the Ministry's commercial target for Uzbekistan, Karimzadeh stated that the goal is to reach \$4 billion in technical and engineering services exports by 2025, with approximately \$900 million of this directed toward Central Asian countries. To achieve this goal, the Trade Development Organization of Iran has several initiatives in place, and they hope to realize this target through collaboration with economic actors in the region.

The official also highlighted Uzbekistan's readiness for mutual economic cooperation, adding that the main focus of bilateral talks has been Iran's preparedness to export technical and engineering services to Uzbekistan. This includes projects in diverse fields such as oil and gas, thermal and hydroelectric power plants, the modernization of refineries and power stations, turbine supply, and the provision of wagons and locomotives.

Karimzadeh also announced the proposal to create a joint investment fund with Uzbekistan to back Iranian projects in the country. He added that Uzbekistan's interest in accessing international waters and utilizing corridors to reach them makes collaboration with Iran highly desirable. Additionally,

memoranda of understanding (MOUs) in the fields of knowledge-based technologies and innovation have been signed with Uzbekistan.

During the meeting, Hassan Mortaji, Head of the Association of Exhibition Organizers for Foreign Countries, discussed the process of holding the "Iran Project" exhibition in Uzbekistan. He mentioned that Iran has a well-organized plan for facilitating meetings and holding discussions between traders from both sides. Moreover, necessary preparations have been made to monitor tenders and provide timely information to participants.

Mortaji emphasized the importance of Iran's presence in regional markets, stating that it could greatly contribute to realizing the country's export ambitions in these markets. The exhibition, "Iran Project" in Uzbekistan, represents part of Iran's efforts to expand its presence in these markets.

He also mentioned that through consultations with the Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce and the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Tashkent, the opportunity was created to hold the "Iran Project" exhibition in Uzbekistan.

Mortaji stressed that with the capabilities of Iranian companies active in exporting technical and engineering services, Iran could capture a share of Uzbekistan's market. Additionally, a conference will be held alongside the exhibition to introduce the export potential of Iranian engineering companies attending the event.

The meeting was attended by representatives from both the public and private sectors, including specialized offices from the Trade Development Organization, Bank Saderat Iran, Islamic Republic of Iran Railways, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Scientific and Technological Cooperation Organization, as well as managers from associations related to technical and engineering sectors and private companies. These participants shared their views, experiences from previous exhibitions, and discussed the opportunities and challenges in the sector.

The "Iran Project" exhibition in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, focusing on the export of technical and engineering services, electricity, energy, water, construction, building materials, oil, gas, petrochemicals, and mining industries, will be held from February 12-15, 2025, with authorization from the Trade Development Organization of Iran.

### Shiraz and Dushanbe Sign Tourism Cooperation Agreement



TEHRAN - A joint cooperation agreement for tourism exchange between Shiraz and Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, was signed in Shiraz. The signing ceremony was attended by the Director General of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts of Fars Province, officials from Shiraz Municipality, the First Secretary of the Embassy of Tajikistan in Iran, and representatives from the private tourism sectors of both countries.

The Director General of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts of Fars, Mohammad Thabet Eqldi, emphasized the shared historical and cultural ties between Iran and Tajikistan during the meeting. He remarked that ancient Iran, once the cultural capital of 33 modern nations, is vividly depicted in Persepolis.

Eqldi stated that the shared cultural heritage and language of the two countries create a welcoming atmosphere for Tajik tourists in Shiraz, while Iranians passionate about their history and civilization have the opportunity to visit Tajikistan to explore its geography and attractions.

Highlighting Fars Province's tourist attractions, he said, "The world knows Iran through Persepolis, and the tombs of renowned poets such as Hafez and Saadi in Shiraz attract visitors from around the globe."

He added that Shiraz is a UNESCO-listed global hub for handicrafts, while Abadeh is recognized as the global city of wood carving, and Firuzabad is nationally known for its handmade woven products. Over 80 active handicraft fields exist across Fars, showcasing the region's rich artistic heritage.

Eqldi further noted that Fars is also a prime destination for nature tourism, offering activities such as mountain climbing and off-road adventures. Moreover, Shiraz's advanced medical facilities and skilled physicians have established it as a leading health tourism destination in Iran, attracting many visitors annually, particularly from the Persian Gulf region.

He underscored the importance of holding cultural weeks and tourism events to showcase the assets of both countries, which would help promote mutual tourism development.

During the meeting, which brought together officials from Fars Province and Tajikistan's tourism sector, including Hukumuddin Rahman, the First Secretary of Tajikistan's Embassy in Iran, and a delegation of Tajik tour operators, face-to-face discussions were held. A bilateral cooperation agreement was signed to enhance collaboration in tourism.

### Electricity Consumption Growth in Iran Three Times the Natural Rate



TEHRAN - According to the Ministry of Energy, a joint meeting was held in Tehran and Alborz province with the participation of Tavanir to discuss how to address unauthorized cryptocurrency mining centers in the capital.

During the meeting, Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi, the CEO of Tavanir, pointed out that electricity consumption in summer is 1.6 times higher than in the colder months due to the use of cooling devices. He described investment in the electricity industry as one of the most costly, emphasizing that building power plants and transmission networks takes time. He stated that the country may face an imbalance in electricity supply for several years until the planned projects are implemented and the energy deficit is overcome.

Rajabi Mashhadi added that electricity consumption is lower in winter, and power plants are sufficient for electricity generation, but the issue of fuel supply to power plants remains critical.

The spokesperson for the electricity industry also addressed cryptocurrency mining in other countries, noting that in many nations, high electricity prices discourage its use for mining. In Europe, for example, electricity is sold for up to 43 cents per kilowatt-hour during peak demand periods. In some countries, authorities take a firm stance against cryptocurrency mining, treating miners as criminals.

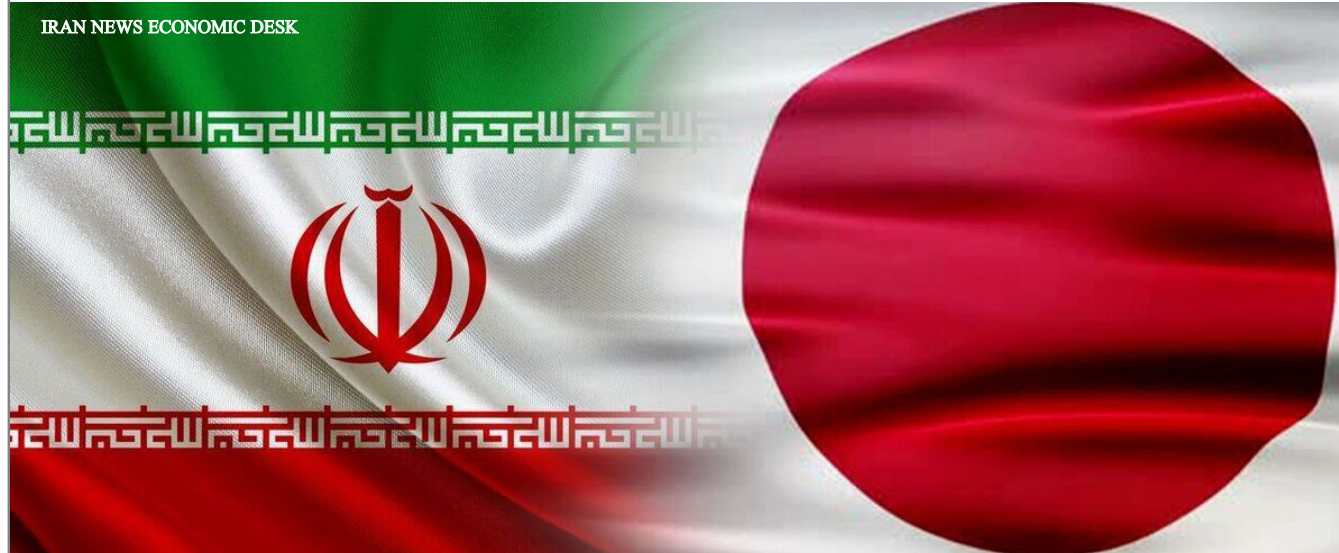
He also highlighted that in countries like China, special locations such as the Sichuan River, which has a large hydroelectric plant, are designated for cryptocurrency mining, with electricity provided at a rate of 4 to 5 cents per kilowatt-hour.

Rajabi Mashhadi emphasized that because electricity in Iran is subsidized, and even free for educational centers and mosques, illegal cryptocurrency mining has spread uncontrollably, at times putting excessive pressure on the electricity distribution network.

He further noted that the normal annual growth rate of electricity consumption is 5%, but it has surged to 16%, three times the natural rate, with one of the main causes being the unchecked expansion of cryptocurrency mining.

In conclusion, the Tavanir CEO stated that to protect the public's rights, the government is working swiftly and decisively to classify illegal cryptocurrency mining as a crime, and that offenders will face severe consequences for their actions.

### Bypassing Sanctions Using Rial and Yen: Opportunities for Iran-Japan Trade



TEHRAN - Hassan Salehvarzi, President of the Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce, recently discussed the latest developments in trade between the two countries.

In an interview with ILNA, he explained that Iran-Japan trade relations were strategically important in previous decades due to Japan's dependence on Iran's energy resources. However, the imposition of extensive sanctions by the United States on Iran's oil and gas exports has severely limited trade between the two countries. Despite these challenges, Salehvarzi emphasized that certain goods can still be exchanged outside the scope of these sanctions.

These goods fall into several categories: Agricultural and Food Products: Iran's agricultural products, such as saffron, pistachios, dried fruits, and dates (especially the high-quality Piarom variety), continue to be in demand in Japan. Fresh fruits like apples, kiwis, and pomegranates, when meeting Japan's quality standards, are also viable for export; Pharmaceutical and Medical Equipment: Iran has significant capacity in biotechnology and generic drug production, making its pharmaceutical exports to Japan possible under humanitarian priorities and the relevant US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licenses. Medical equipment, including diagnostic kits and various medical devices, can also be marketed in Japan; and Handicrafts and Cultural Products: Iranian handicrafts, such as Persian rugs, enamel work, inlay art (Khatamkari), and ceramic goods, are popular in Japan due to a strong local appreciation for high-quality craftsmanship. Semi-precious stones like turquoise, agate, and

rubies, which are traditionally used in Japanese jewelry, could also serve as a potential trade focus.

Salehvarzi also pointed out that some petrochemical products, which are in wide demand in Japan's industries and fall outside the scope of sanctions, could continue to be traded between the two nations.

When asked about strategies to encourage Japanese businesses to engage with Iran despite sanctions, Salehvarzi mentioned that Japanese companies are cautious in their business decisions due to their economic and security ties with the United States. Therefore, if US restrictions ease or Japan negotiates new exemptions, Iran could offer solutions such as barter agreements, special free trade zones, export guarantees to regional markets, financial and insurance support, and reduced trade costs.

He also highlighted the use of barter trade as a method to mitigate the risks of sanctions. For example, Iran could exchange agricultural products, raw materials, or petrochemical goods with Japanese products like industrial machinery or medical equipment.

Furthermore, Salehvarzi suggested that free trade zones in Iran, such as Kish, Chabahar, or Arvand, could provide a simplified regulatory environment for trade with Japan. Iran could also ensure Japanese companies that their goods would be exported to regional markets like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Financial risk could be mitigated through domestic banks or third-party financial institutions, and reducing customs and transport costs could also increase Japanese companies' interest in collaborating with Iran.

### Japan Donates \$4.5m for Restoration of Lake Urmia



TEHRAN - The Japanese government has pledged ¥690 million (approximately \$4.5 million) to the Islamic Republic of Iran for a project focused on wetland conservation systems, including the restoration of Lake Urmia and surrounding areas.

During a signing ceremony, representatives highlighted Japan's role in sustainable natural resource management in Iran since 2014. The project, set to run from 2024 to 2028, will be a collaborative effort between Iran's Department of Environment, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). It aims to improve sustainable agriculture and introduce climate-adaptive livelihoods while preserving biodiversity.

Japanese Ambassador to Iran, Tsukada Tamaki, expressed pride in the initiative, noting the historical friendship between the two nations. He emphasized the international importance of preserving wetlands like Lake Urmia, which host diverse ecosystems and migratory birds. Tamaki recalled a personal visit to the lake, where witnessing its deterioration strengthened his resolve to support its restoration.

This project builds on Japan's decade-long support for Lake Urmia through development aid agencies like JICA. It will implement water management systems based on analytical models developed by FAO and best practices from UNDP. The initiative also addresses overuse of water resources and promotes sustainable industries such as eco-tourism.

## U.S. Will Not Return Nuclear Weapons to Ukraine

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States is not considering returning to Ukraine the nuclear weapons it gave up after the Soviet Union collapsed, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said. Sullivan made his remarks when questioned about a New York Times article last month that said some unidentified Western officials had suggested U.S. President Joe Biden could give Ukraine the arms before he leaves office. "That is not under consideration, no. What we are doing is surging various conventional capacities to Ukraine so that they can effectively defend themselves and take the fight to the Russians, not (giving them) nuclear capability," he told ABC. Last week, Russia said the idea was "absolute insanity" and that preventing such a scenario was one of the reasons why Moscow sent troops into Ukraine.



## UNRWA Stops Aid Delivery Via Key Gaza-Israel Crossing



GAZA (Dispatches) - The UN agency for Palestinian refugees has halted the delivery of aid through the key Kerem Shalom crossing between Israel and Gaza because of safety fears, its chief said.

"The road out of this crossing has not been safe for months. On 16 November, a large convoy of aid trucks was stolen by armed gangs," UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini posted on X.

"Yesterday, we tried to bring in a few food trucks on the same route. They were all taken," he added, warning hunger was "rapidly deepening" in Gaza.

"The humanitarian operation has become unnecessarily impossible," he said. The United Nations said Friday that Gaza has descended into anarchy, with hunger soaring, looting rampant and rising numbers of rapes in shelters as public order falls apart.

Israel, which imposed a total siege of the Hamas-ruled territory after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks, blames says that relief organizations cannot distribute large quantities of aid.

"Only 7 percent of the aid that came into the Gaza Strip in November was coordinated by UNRWA," the Israeli defense ministry responsible for civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, COGAT, said on X.

"There are dozens of humanitarian organizations operating in the Gaza Strip that continue to take a growing role in delivering humanitarian aid," it added.

During a press visit Thursday, the Israeli army showed aid shipments at the crossing and said they wait at the Gaza side of Kerem Shalom for "months".

Lazzarini also said Israel "must refrain from attacks on humanitarian workers".

His demand follows an Israeli strike Saturday that killed three contractors of the US charity World Central Kitchen, including one who Israel's military said was involved in October 7.

Save the Children later said a strike killed one of its staff members, the second employee to be killed since the war began last October.

## Russian, Syrian Jets Intensify Bombing of Syrian Rebel Territory



AMMAN (Dispatches) - At least 25 people were killed in northwestern Syria in air strikes carried out by the Syrian government and Russia, the Syrian opposition-run rescue service known as the White Helmets said early on Monday.

Russian and Syrian jets struck the rebel-held city of Idlib in northern Syria on Sunday, military sources said, as President Bashar al-Assad vowed to crush insurgents who had swept into the city of Aleppo.

The army also said it had recaptured several towns that rebels had overrun in recent days.

Residents said one attack hit a crowded residential area in the centre of Idlib, the largest city in a rebel enclave near the Turkish border where around four million people live in makeshift tents and dwellings.

At least seven people were killed and dozens injured, according to rescuers at the scene. The Syrian army and its ally Russia say they target the hideouts of insurgent groups and deny attacking civilians.

Ten children were among the dead in the air strikes in and around Idlib and other targets in rebel-held territory near Aleppo on Sunday, according to the White Helmets.

The total death toll from Syrian and Russian strikes since Nov. 27 had climbed to 56, including 20 children, the group added in a statement on X.

The insurgents are a coalition of Turkey-backed mainstream secular armed groups along with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an Islamist group that has been designated a terrorist outfit by the U.S., Russia, Turkey and other states.

The insurgents seized control of all of Idlib province in recent days, the boldest rebel assault for years in a civil war where front lines had largely been frozen since 2020.

Insurgents also swept into the city of Aleppo, east of Idlib, on Friday night, forcing the army to redeploy.

In remarks published on state media, Assad said: "Terrorists only know the language of force and it is the language we will crush them with".

The Syrian army said dozens of its soldiers had been killed in the fighting in Aleppo.

Russian war bloggers reported on Sunday that Moscow had dismissed Sergei Kisel, the general in charge of its forces in Syria, after insurgents swept into Aleppo. Reuters has requested comment from the Russian defense ministry.

In a joint statement, the United States, France, Germany, and Britain urged "de-escalation by all parties and the protection of civilians and infrastructure to prevent further displacement and disruption of humanitarian access".

Inside Aleppo city, streets were mostly empty and many shops were closed on Sunday as scared residents stayed at home. There was still a heavy flow of civilians leaving the city, witnesses and residents said.

Rebel fighters waving the opposition flag drove through the city, Yusuf Khatib, a resident, told Reuters by phone. Some rebels took up positions on street intersections, he added.

Ahmad Tutenji, a merchant in the affluent New Aleppo neighbourhood, said he was surprised how quickly the army left. "I am shocked at how they fled and abandoned us."

Abdullah al Halabi, a pensioner whose neighbourhood was bombed near the central area of Qasr al Baladi, said people were terrified they would see a repeat of the Russian-led bombing that killed thousands of people before driving out rebels a decade ago.

Syrian troops who had withdrawn from the city were now regrouping and reinforcements were also being sent to help in the counter-attack, army sources said.

Aleppo had been firmly held by the government since a 2016 victory there, one of the war's major turning points, when Russian-backed Syrian forces besieged and laid waste to rebel-held eastern areas of what had been the country's largest city.

Rebels said on Sunday they had pushed further south of Aleppo city and captured the town of Khansir in an attempt to cut the army's main supply route to Aleppo city.

Rebel sources said they had also captured Sheikh Najjar estate, one of the country's major industrial zones.

Reuters could not independently confirm the battlefield accounts.

The rebel gains came after Israel stepped up its strikes on Iranian bases in Syria and Iran-backed Hezbollah forces in Lebanon. Militias allied to Iran, led by Hezbollah, have had a strong presence in the Aleppo area.

## Global Arms Sales Surge in 2023 Driven by Wars and Tensions in Asia



PARIS (Dispatches) - Sales by major arms makers were boosted last year by wars in Ukraine and Gaza and tensions in Asia, with marked increases for manufacturers based in Russia and the Middle East, a report said Monday.

Sales of arms and military services by the world's 100 largest arms companies totalled \$632 billion in 2023, up 4.2 percent, according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Revenues had dipped in 2022 as global weapons makers struggled to meet the increase in demand, but many of them managed to increase production last year, the authors of the report noted.

In a sign of this surge in demand, all 100 companies tracked achieved sales in excess of \$1 billion last year for the first time.

"There was a marked rise in arms revenues in 2023, and this is likely to continue in 2024," Lorenzo Scarazzato, a researcher with the SIPRI Military Expenditure and Arms Production, said in a statement.

Sales from the world's top 100 arms companies "still did not fully reflect the scale of demand, and many companies have launched recruitment drives, suggesting they are optimistic about future sales," Scarazzato added.

## Georgia's Pro-EU Protests Spread as PM Rejects Calls for New Election

TBILISI (Dispatches) - Thousands took part in a fourth day of stormy nationwide protests against a government decision to shelve EU membership talks, as the prime minister rebuffed calls for new elections.

The Black Sea nation has been rocked by turmoil since the governing Georgian Dream party claimed victory in October 26 parliamentary polls that the pro-European opposition said were fraudulent.

The opposition is boycotting the new parliament, while pro-EU President Salome Zourabichvili has asked the constitutional court to annul the election result and declared the new legislature and government "illegitimate".

Tens of thousands have taken to the streets for the protests against the election result and now Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's announcement Thursday that Georgia would not seek to open accession talks with the European Union until 2028.

About 150 demonstrators have been arrested in the new wave of protests.

Thousands waving European and Georgian flags gathered outside parliament Sunday evening, with some banging on the metal door blocking its entrance.

Some protesters wore diving masks to shield their eyes from tear gas, which law enforcement has used in recent days.

Simultaneous protests took place in cities across Georgia.

Fuelling popular anger, Kobakhidze ruled out new parliamentary elections, saying that "the formation of the new government based on the October 26 parliamentary elections has been completed."

Critics accuse Georgian Dream, in power for more than a decade, of



having steered the country away from the EU in recent years and of moving closer to Russia, an accusation it denies.

Earlier this week, the party nominated far-right former football international Mikheil Kavelashvili for the largely ceremonial post of president.

But Zourabichvili told FRANCE 24 in an interview on Saturday that she would not step down until last month's contested parliamentary elections are re-run.

Brussels has not recognised the outcome of the October elections and demanded an investigation into "serious electoral irregularities".

The European Parliament adopted a resolution rejecting Georgian

Dream's victory, calling for a re-run and for sanctions against top Georgian officials, including Kobakhidze.

Zourabichvili said Saturday that she had set up a "national council" of opposition parties and civil society representatives, which would ensure "stability in this country".

Calling herself "the only legitimate institution in the country", Zourabichvili said that "as long as there are no new elections... my mandate continues".

"Nobody outside Georgia, democratic partners, nobody has recognised (October's) the elections," she added.

"I will be the representative of this legitimate, stable transition," she said.

Constitutional law experts, including one author of Georgia's constitution, Vaktang Khmaladze, told AFP that any decisions made by the new parliament - including the nomination of Kobakhidze as prime minister and the coming presidential election - would be invalid.

That is because parliament had approved its own credentials in violation of a legal requirement to await a court ruling on Zourabichvili's bid to annul the election results, they said.

In a heavy handed crackdown, police in some instances have chased protesters through the streets of Tbilisi, beating

them and making arrests.

Masked officers in riot gear have fired rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons to disperse protesters hurling fireworks. Flames were seen coming from a window of the parliament building on Saturday.

Hundreds of public servants, including from the ministries of foreign affairs, defence and education, as well as a number of judges, issued joint statements protesting Kobakhidze's decision.

More than 200 Georgian diplomats criticised the move as contradicting the constitution and leading the country "into international isolation".

## Zelensky Urges NATO Invite as Top EU Officials Pledge Unwavering Support

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Sunday that his country needed security guarantees from NATO and more weapons to defend itself before any talks with Russia.

He made the comments after meeting the EU's new head of diplomacy Kaja Kallas and EU Council chief Antonio Costa, who were visiting Kyiv as a show of support on their first day in office.

"An invitation for Ukraine to join NATO is a necessary thing for our survival," Zelensky said at a press conference with Costa.

Ukraine faces a tough winter ahead, with Russia unleashing devastating barrages against its power grid and Kyiv's fatigued forces losing ground on the frontline.

Questions are also swirling around the future of US support once Donald Trump assumes the presidency in January, with fears he could force Kyiv to make painful concessions in pursuit of a quick peace deal.

Zelensky said his country needed to be in a "strong position" before any talks with the Kremlin, calling for "steps forward with NATO" and a "good number" of long-distance weapons to defend itself.

"Only when we have all these items and we are strong, after that, we have to make the very important... agenda of meeting with one or another of the killers," the Ukrainian leader said, adding that the EU and NATO should be involved in any negotiations.

Costa said the European Union would give Ukraine its "unwavering" support.

"We have stood with you since the very first day of this war of aggression, and you can count on us to continue to stand with you," he told Zelensky.

The European Union's new leadership team is keen to show it remains firm on backing



Kyiv at a perilous moment for Ukraine nearly three years into its fight against Russia's invasion.

Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened this week to strike government buildings in Kyiv with his new Oreshnik missile, after the US gave Ukraine approval to fire long-range ATACMS missiles into Russia for the first time.

A Russian drone dropped explosives on a bus in the southern Kherson region on Sunday, killing three people, authorities said, while the Russian army claimed to have captured two new frontline villages in the east.

Zelensky on Friday appeared to begin staking out his position ahead of any potential peace talks.

He called on NATO to offer guaranteed protections to parts of Ukraine controlled by Kyiv in order to "stop the hot stage of the war", and implied he would then be willing to wait to regain other territory seized by Russia.

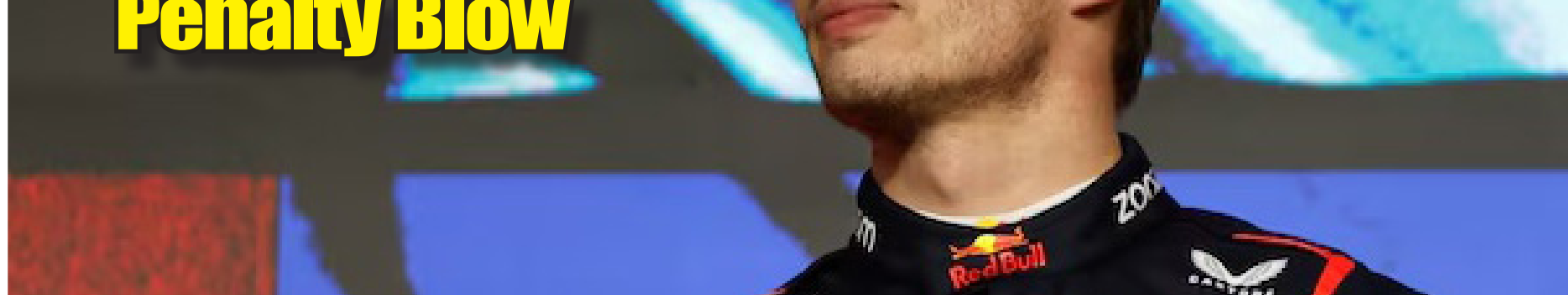
"If we will have a frozen conflict without any strong position for Ukraine, Putin will come back in two, three or five years," Zelensky said Sunday.

Kallas told journalists on the journey into Ukraine that for Kyiv "the strongest security guarantee is NATO membership".

"We need to definitely discuss this - if Ukraine decides to draw the line somewhere then how can we secure peace so that Putin doesn't go any further," she said.

But diplomats at NATO say there appears little prospect of the alliance granting Ukraine membership soon given opposition from a raft of members cautious of getting dragged into war with Russia.

## Verstappen Wins in Qatar, McLaren Suffer Penalty Blow



DOHA (Dispatches) - Red Bull's Max Verstappen won the Qatar Grand Prix on Sunday, a day after being stripped of pole position, as McLaren and Ferrari took their constructors' title duel down to next weekend's last race of the season in Abu Dhabi.

The win was the Dutch driver's ninth of the Formula One season, second in a row in Qatar and the first since he wrapped up his fourth successive title in Las Vegas a week earlier.

"Karma is a wonderful thing. You definitely did not drive unnecessarily slowly today. Great job," said Red Bull boss Christian Horner over the radio after Verstappen took the chequered flag.

Stewards had handed the champion a one-place grid drop on Saturday for driving too slowly, with Mercedes' George Russell the beneficiary but making a poor start from the top slot and finishing fourth.

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc finished runner-up, 6.031 seconds behind, after McLaren's Lando Norris was handed a surprisingly tough 10 second stop/go penalty for speeding during yellow warning flags.

That dropped the Briton from second, a position seized at the start, and challenging for the lead to 10th at the chequered flag with the consolation of fastest lap for a bonus point to double his meagre score.

Saturday sprint winner Oscar Piastri finished third for McLaren in a race punctuated by crashes and three safety car periods.

McLaren's lead was trimmed to 21 points with 44 remaining to be won, and a first constructors' title since 1998 beckoning, while reigning champions Red Bull were mathematically out of contention.

"Lando and I were within 1.8s of each other the whole time, pushing each other and honestly, it was a lot of fun out there," said Verstappen.

Norris, now only eight points clear of Leclerc, saw a missed opportunity as others questioned the harshness of the penalty.

"I don't know if I've missed it or just been dumb, but the rule is, if you don't slow down under the yellow that's the penalty, so it's fair penalty," he said.

"I've made the job of the team much harder than it needs to be. The team are doing a great job but I've let them down."

Ferrari's Carlos Sainz was also slowed by a puncture and long pitstop, finishing sixth with Alpine's Pierre Gasly an impressive fifth to send the Renault-owned team back up to sixth overall.

Fernando Alonso was seventh for Aston Martin and China's Zhou Guanyu scored Sauber's first points of the season with eighth.

Kevin Magnussen was ninth for Haas, who dropped back behind Alpine.

Seven times world champion Lewis Hamilton collected a five second penalty for a false start, then a puncture and finished only 12th in his penultimate race for Mercedes before moving to Ferrari.

As a final blow of the night, he was also handed a drive-through penalty for speeding in the pit lane.

"The car and I don't get along really that well," said the Briton, who at one point asked to retire.

"We were very far off at the beginning. We didn't have enough wing to start with, the cars were quite different and it wasn't really great to drive. But it's my fault so apologies to the team for the false start and the pit lane incident."

Verstappen's team mate Sergio Perez also had a dismal time, failing to finish.

## World Chess Champ Ding, Teen Challenger Even After Six Games



LONDON (Dispatches) - The 2024 World Chess Championship remained finely poised Sunday after defending champion Ding Liren and teenage challenger Gukesh Dommaraju played out a thrilling 46-move draw.

The score is tied at 3.0 points each after six games, rounding off the first week of the 14-game match. The play resumes Tuesday.

The 32-year-old champion from China started strongly, putting his 18-year-old Indian challenger on the defensive.

But Gukesh recovered to send the match down into a dramatic double-rook endgame, with pawns strewn across the board.

A threefold repetition after 46 moves from both players ended the game in a draw after more than four hours.

The Indian rejected a chance to end the game in a draw earlier despite being worse off on the board, and nearly paid for it.

"I just thought there was still a lot of play left in the position and I didn't really see much danger for me," Gukesh told reporters after the match on why he decided to play on.

"I wanted to play a longer game than just finishing at that point."

Ding, who played with the white pieces, admitted that he had let his advantage slip at critical moments.

"That's what I should improve in the next couple of games," he said after the match.

Ding, who beat Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi to become the world champion in Kazakhstan last year, recorded a 42-move victory over Gukesh in game one Monday to end a winless run of 28 classical games dating back to January.

## Serie A Title Race Loses Significance After Fiorentina Player Collapses on Field

MILAN (AP) - The Italian league title race didn't seem so important on Sunday after a player collapsed on the field during a Serie A match.

League leader Napoli had won 1-0 at Torino earlier in the day and was waiting to see how its rivals would fare, especially Fiorentina and Inter Milan, which were playing each other later Sunday and were just four points behind.

However, Fiorentina midfielder Edoardo Bove fell to the ground in the 16th minute of the match, which was abandoned shortly afterward with the scoreline at 0-0.

The 22-year-old Italian was swiftly stretchered off to an ambulance and taken to hospital, where he is in a medically induced coma.

Fiorentina said initial tests have "ruled out acute damage to the central nervous system and the cardio-respiratory system" and that Bove will be re-evaluated in the next 24 hours.

Fiorentina players were distraught on the field and were comforted by staff members as well as Inter players. Several were openly sobbing before both teams filed off the field.

Napoli will end the weekend still top of a tight Serie A table.

Scott McTominay scored the only goal of the match in the first half as Napoli pulled away from one of its closest rivals as Lazio lost 3-1 at relegation-threatened Parma.



Lazio stayed on 28 points along with Atalanta, Inter and Fiorentina, while Napoli moved onto 32. Atalanta visits Roma on Monday. Juventus has 26 points after substitute Ante Rebic leveled in stoppages to snatch a 1-1 draw for Lecce. It was an entertaining match at Torino where Napoli broke the

deadlock in the 31st minute. Khvicha Kvaratskhelia kept possession as he made his way into the area from the left before laying the ball off to McTominay for the Scotland midfielder to drive into the near bottom corner.

Torino should have leveled almost immediately when Saul Coco just had to bundle the ball into an empty net from close range but somehow fell over it instead.

Napoli had numerous chances to extend its advantage but Vanja Milinkovic-Savic was in impressive form in the Torino goal.

Lazio's run of seven straight wins had been brought to an end by a draw against Ludogorets in the Europa League midweek and it was worse on Sunday as it fell to its first loss since October.

Lazio had two goals disallowed and a penalty revoked after a VAR check in a frustrating first half for the visitors.

Parma inched four points clear of the drop zone with the win.

Patrick Vieira recorded his first win as Genoa coach with a 2-0 victory at Udinese, which played almost the entire match with 10 men.

## Clutch Plays Late Carry Rockets Past Thunder



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Fred VanVleet scored a game-high 38 points and Dillon Brooks nailed a midrange jumper to beat the shot clock and give Houston the lead for good as the host Rockets eked out a 119-116 win over the Oklahoma City Thunder on Sunday in a matchup between the top two seeds in the Western Conference.

VanVleet sank four free throws in the final 4.6 seconds as the Rockets squared the season series at a game apiece and closed to within a half-game of the Thunder atop the West. Brooks' jumper with 33.6 seconds left followed a wild scramble and gave the Rockets a 115-113 lead.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander paced the Thunder with 32 points while Jalen Williams added 22 points, including a 3-pointer with 2.4 seconds left that sliced the deficit to one. Isaiah Hartenstein added a double-double (19 points, 13 rebounds) while Cason Wallace tallied 14 points, including two 3-pointers to match 3s from VanVleet down the hectic waning moments.

The fourth quarter featured seven ties but the Rockets, who trailed 93-85 late in the third after Gilgeous-Alexander led a 16-4 run, didn't take their first lead in the fourth until VanVleet hit a buzzer-beating 3 with 1:29 left. Wallace responded with a corner 3 but the Rockets repeatedly answered back.

Alperen Sengun (20 points, 14 rebounds) and Jabari Smith Jr. (15 points, 14 rebounds) registered double-doubles for Houston. Sengun added nine assists, including on Brooks' late jumper.

Aaron Wiggins scored 13 points off the Thunder bench.

The Rockets used their prowess on the offensive glass to erase an early five-point deficit, with Amen Thompson providing a 22-18 lead with his second-chance basket at the 3:38 mark of the first. Behind Brooks' 10 points, the Rockets led by eight before Gilgeous-Alexander answered a Tari Eason 3-pointer with one of his own to cut the deficit to 33-28 entering the second period.

The Thunder used a flurry of 3-pointers to respond to a Jalen Green three-point play that lifted Houston to its largest lead, 45-34, with 7:58 left in the half. Kenrich Williams and Luguentz Dort drilled consecutive 3s to key the comeback before Wiggins and Gilgeous-Alexander sank 3s in succession that closed the margin to four, which the Thunder narrowed to 62-60 at halftime.

Meanwhile Donovan Mitchell scored a game-high 35 points, including 11 straight for Cleveland late in the fourth quarter, to propel the Cavaliers to a 115-111 comeback win over the visiting Boston Celtics.

## Liverpool Pile on Misery for Man City

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool piled on the misery for Manchester City as the Premier League leaders beat the troubled champions 2-0 at Anfield, while Manchester United boss Ruben Amorim earned his first league win with a 4-0 rout of Everton.

Arne Slot's side moved nine points clear of second-placed Arsenal after Cody Gakpo's first-half opener and Mohamed Salah's late penalty dealt another blow to reeling City, who are languishing 11 points behind Liverpool in fifth place.

City have lost four successive top-flight games for the first time since 2008, making them the first Premier League champions to endure such a dismal run the season after claiming the title.

City have clawed back significant deficits to win the Premier League in the Guardiola era, but they have never managed to lift the title after being behind by more than 10 points.

City's seven-game winless run ranks as boss Pep Guardiola's longest barren streak in his glittering managerial career.

Just weeks after he signed a new two-year



contract, Liverpool fans taunted Guardiola with chants of "you're getting sacked in the morning", prompting a defiant response from the Spaniard, who held up six fingers to illustrate the number of titles he has won with City.

"The first 20 minutes Liverpool were unstoppable. We tried to play with a lot of control and passes, but it was difficult to take it," Guardiola said.

"We'll reset and start from zero. It is difficult to believe it. I rely a lot on these players. We'll see what happens by the end of the season."

Liverpool have won 18 of their 20 games in all competitions since Slot replaced Jurgen Klopp in the close-season.

With 11 victories from their 13 Premier League matches, Liverpool are firm favourites to win the title for the first time since 2020.

"We came close to perfection. That's the only way to beat a quality team like City," Slot said.

"We have to stay sharp. I don't think anyone, including me, would have predicted this—to win so much with all the difficult teams we have played already."