

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Says the Continuation of the Astana Process on Syria Depends on the Developments in the Arab Country and the Decisions of Iran, Russia and Turkiye

# IRAN NEWS

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baqaei Says Iran Has Implemented Necessary Measures to Ensure the Safety and Security of Its Embassy Staff in Damascus

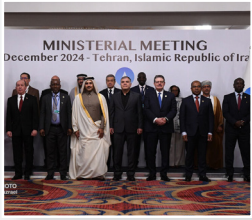
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## U.S. Occupation, Sanctions Source of Syria Crisis



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's ambassador to Syria says the US illegal presence in the Arab country and its plundering of the Syrian resources, along with the sanctions it imposed on Damascus, played a key role in the latest developments in the country as militants captured the capital.

"Undoubtedly, the Americans play a role in any part of the world, even though they claim they play no role; they have occupied Syria's most important economic areas that provide the basic needs of the country's people, such as oil, gas, agriculture and water resources for more than 12 years," Hossein Akbari said on Sunday.

"They have looted these resources and sold them via smuggling. Can a more blatant intervention be imagined?"

The US military has for long stationed its forces and equipment in northeastern Syria, with the Pentagon claiming that the deployment is aimed at preventing the oilfields in the area from falling into the hands of the Daesh terrorists.

Damascus, however, maintains the deployment is meant to plunder the country's natural resources. Former US president Donald Trump admitted on several occasions that American forces were in the Arab country for its oil wealth.

The ambassador blamed the US presence in these areas for all the problems of the Syrian people, including power cuts, and the country's economic crisis.

The US claims of non-intervention are "in complete contradiction with such actions," Akbari stressed.

Akbari noted that the US has also "sanctioned the Syrian government" and "provided the opponents of the government with weapons and equipment" which he described as real examples of interference.

He warned that foreign meddling in Syria and the diversity of ideas and movements could trigger insecurity in the country.

"We hope that God will help the nation benefit from the blessing of security and overcome the problems."

On Sunday, Armed groups, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militants captured the Syrian capital, which led to the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's government.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said the government was ready to "extend its hand" to the opposition and hand over its functions to a transitional government.

## Iran Repeatedly Warned Assad to Heed Syrian People's Demands



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf says top anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani repeatedly advised former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to pay attention to his people.

Qalibaf was speaking in a meeting with university students in Tehran on Sunday, after militant groups, headed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), seized the Syrian capital following a lightning attack.

"I will say this frankly: Martyr Soleimani repeatedly told Bashar al-Assad that he should pay attention to his people, because apart from Daesh, some of the opposition were armed protest groups who were discussed even at the Astana meetings and had certain concerns," he said.

Qalibaf stressed that Iran has never confronted those groups but only dealt with the Daesh terrorists.

He emphasized that Iran respects any decision taken by the Syrian people and adopts approaches based on the government that will be formed in Syria.

If the new government in Syria does not pursue an approach based on Daesh terrorists' ideology and if it has no intention to be in contact with the Israeli regime, Iran will then make efforts to forge unity among Muslim nations, the top Iranian parliamentarian said.

IRA NEWS NATIONAL DESK



## President Says Cultural Revolution Must Begin With Ourselves

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized the fundamental role of justice and fairness in cultural development, urging that any cultural revolution must begin with self-reflection. Speaking at the 40th-anniversary commemoration of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution on Monday, he highlighted the importance of ethical governance rooted in justice.

"There is no greater injustice than standing against what is right," the president stated. "A faithful and righteous individual must always speak the truth and advocate for justice."

President Pezeshkian outlined the essence of justice, noting that it transcends gender, ethnicity, religion, and political ideologies. "Justice must be upheld universally, without prejudice or favoritism," he said. He linked deviations from justice to self-centeredness and disregard for others' rights, stressing the need for unity rooted in shared beliefs and values.

The president underscored that transformative change should begin with those in positions of authority. "We cannot lead others effectively without first reforming ourselves," he remarked. He criticized the tendency to impose changes on others without embodying those values personally.

"Acting with justice and fairness ensures social satisfaction," he added. "While some may resist due to personal interests, the broader society will support just governance if their rights are protected."

President Pezeshkian rejected the effectiveness of command-based approaches in cultural development. "Authoritarian language—punishments, imprisonments, or executions—darkens hearts, weakens faith, and accelerates societal upheavals," he said. Instead, he advocated for leading by example, asserting that actions rather than directives inspire change.

The president highlighted the critical role of education and scientific advancement in shaping cultural leadership. He stressed the importance of creating an environment where students feel empowered to grow and contribute meaningfully.

"We must operate based on justice, fairness, and equity, extending the same principles to friends and adversaries alike," he stated. Pezeshkian warned against self-serving tendencies, which he identified as barriers to cultural and social progress.

Turning attention to the youth, Pezeshkian acknowledged that they are shaped by the values imparted by society and its leaders. He urged introspection, asking, "How have we acted in a way that leads them to seek alternatives instead of following the right path? The problem lies with us, not external influences."

He called for accountability in governance, advocating for corrective measures within leadership instead of penalizing the younger generation.

Pezeshkian rejected the notion that beliefs and convictions can be instilled through coercion. "Belief and culture are established through inspiration, role modeling, and demonstrating values in action," he said. He urged leaders to embody the principles they wish to instill in society.

Addressing the preservation of cultural and national identity, Pezeshkian argued that identity crises arise when individuals feel marginalized or excluded. "When people are denied the opportunity to thrive based on their knowledge, art, or capabilities, they seek alternative avenues to assert their identity," he observed.

The president concluded with an appeal to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution to prioritize justice and equity in its decisions. "If justice is realized, disputes based on ethnicity, religion, or other divisions will disappear," he said. He expressed hope for a future where all individuals feel respected and valued within society, fostering harmony and shared progress.

This speech underlines a call for introspection and reform among leaders to inspire broader societal change, highlighting justice, science, and fairness as the pillars of a sustainable cultural revolution.

## Syrian Army's Inability to Respond and Unexpected Pace of Developments Was Surprising

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says the Islamic Republic had alerted the Syrian government to an impending offensive by militants before it was launched. Still, the Syrian army was "surprisingly" incapable of countering the lightning onslaught.

Araqchi made the remarks on Sunday following the fall of the Syrian government after militant groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) stormed the capital Damascus.

Araqchi said that during his recent meeting, he found President Bashar al-Assad surprised and complaining about the state of his army.

The Iranian foreign minister said that the main responsibility to protect the country was of the Syrian army, and Iran did not consider itself a duty in this regard.

"The Syrian government did not expect this from us either, because this issue was related to the internal matters of Syria, the government's relationship with the opposition groups and the people of the country," Araqchi said.

"In this regard, Iran could only provide guidance and advice," he said.

"I remember that one of our serious recommendations to the Syrian government has always been to have dialogue and interaction with opposition groups and try to resolve issues peacefully without harming the people," the top Iranian diplomat stated.

"The formation of the Astana process has largely been in this direction. As you know, Iran, Russia and Turkey created an 'Astana' negotiation process," he added.

"The purpose of this process was to provide a basis for these three countries, which are somehow involved in the internal developments of Syria, to help reforms and achieve political solutions," he said.

"The last meeting of this process was held yesterday, which was the continuation of the same path and goals," Araqchi said on Sunday.

"The Astana process was trying to help reduce tensions and promote internal reforms in



Syria through the cooperation of these three countries," he noted.

Iran's foreign minister said the developments in Syria will not weaken the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah.

Araqchi said Hezbollah's current munitions, equipment and facilities are enough for its resistance over the next one or two years.

The top diplomat said Syria has been one of the important members of the axis of the resistance and played a significant role in confronting Israel and supporting Palestinians.

Araqchi noted that Iran is closely monitoring the developments and its approach will depend on the policy militant groups in the Arab country adopt toward the Islamic Republic.

On Saturday, Araqchi met with the foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey in the Qatari capital of Doha.

The top diplomats of the three guarantor states of the Astana peace process discussed the developments in Syria following the resurgence of militancy in the Arab country.

Araqchi called for a "political dialogue" between the Syrian government and militant groups. He said the "most important" issue agreed by the parties was that "political dialogue between the Syrian government and the legitimate opposition groups" should begin.

However, on Sunday, militants seized control of the capital Damascus. President Assad resigned and issued instructions for a peaceful transition of power.

In a statement earlier, Russia's Foreign Ministry said President Assad had resigned and left Syria, but it did not provide details on where he had gone.

However, later in the day, Russian media reported that Assad arrived in Moscow along with his family.

Citing a source in the Kremlin, several Russian media outlets reported that the Russian government has granted Assad and his family asylum.

## Only Syrian People Must Decide Syria's Fate Without Foreign Meddling



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran says only the Syrian people can make decisions about the country's fate without any "destructive" foreign meddling.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on Sunday following the fall of the Syrian government after militant groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) stormed and captured the capital Damascus.

The statement again reaffirmed the Islamic Republic's principled stance on respecting Syria's unity, national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"In order to achieve this important [issue], it is necessary to end military conflicts as soon as possible, prevent terrorist acts, and initiate national dialogue with the participation of all segments of Syrian society to form an inclusive government that represents all Syrian people," it said.

It emphasized that Iran supports international mechanisms based on United Nations Resolution 2254 to pursue the political process in Syria, as it has in the past.

The ministry added that Iran will continue its constructive interaction with the UN in this regard.

Iran reiterates the status of Syria as an "important and influential" country in the West Asia region and will spare no effort to help the country establish security and stability, it pointed out.

According to the statement, Iran will continue its consultations with all influential parties, particularly those in the region.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran closely monitors developments in Syria and the region and will adopt appropriate approaches and positions while taking into account the behavior and performance of influential players in the Syrian political and security scene," it said.

The ministry stressed the importance of ensuring the security of all Syrian citizens and nationals of other countries as well as preserving the sanctity of religious and holy sites.

It is also imperative to protect diplomatic and consular premises in accordance with international law, it added.

## Iran, Switzerland to Expand Collaboration in Medical Sciences



TEHRAN - Minister of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education, Mohammadreza Zafarhandi, expressed a strong willingness to enhance medical and scientific cooperation with Switzerland during a meeting with Swiss Ambassador Nadine Olivier Lozano in Tehran.

Highlighting the historical academic and scientific ties between the two nations, Zafarhandi emphasized the potential for joint ventures in medical sciences, including collaborative conferences and webinars. "There has been a longstanding connection between Iran and Switzerland in academic and scientific fields. Establishing joint initiatives in medical sciences could further strengthen this relationship," he said.

Zafarhandi proposed setting up a joint working desk to address technical challenges and remove barriers to cooperation. He also suggested hosting the second Iran-Switzerland Economic Commission in Tehran to discuss technical and operational matters.

Ambassador Lozano underscored the significance of health collaborations as a cornerstone of Iran-Switzerland relations. She noted that 70% of Switzerland's exports to Iran consist of pharmaceuticals and healthcare products.

Praising Iran's advancements in medical sciences, Lozano remarked, "The level and quality of Iran's medical universities and healthcare sector are impressive. Iranian doctors working in Switzerland are highly successful, and collaboration with them is a key area for strengthening scientific relations between our countries."

The ambassador also expressed Switzerland's interest in expanding health sector partnerships and addressing challenges faced by Swiss companies operating in Iran. She emphasized that overcoming these obstacles would improve access to high-quality healthcare products for the Iranian population.



# IRAN NEWS



## Supreme Leader to Deliver Speech Wednesday

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei will make a speech focusing on regional developments on Wednesday. The Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of the Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei made the announcement about the Leader's speech on Sunday evening. Thousands of people from different walks of life will meet the Supreme Leader that day at the Imam Khomeini Hosseinieh in Tehran, the statement said. The office also noted that Ayatollah Khamenei, during the meeting, will address the gathering on the recent developments in the region.

## Iran Plays a Key Role in Global Energy Security



TEHRAN - Oil Minister has emphasized the country's crucial role in ensuring global energy security through the development of gas transmission and export infrastructure.

Mohsen Paknejad, speaking on Sunday evening about Iran's role in the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) and the global gas market, highlighted Iran's strategic position as the holder of the world's second-largest natural gas reserves. This, coupled with its geographical location, gives Iran a vital role in the global energy landscape.

Paknejad noted that Iran has become one of the leading natural gas producers globally through projects like the South Pars Gas Field. Despite facing severe sanctions, the country has relied on domestic capacities to expand its gas resources. Efforts are also underway to bolster energy diplomacy and broaden international cooperation through initiatives like gas swaps.

The minister pointed to the significance of the GECF's 26th Ministerial Meeting, which underscored the importance of international cooperation in the natural gas sector and its role in global energy security. He said the forum provided a platform for member and observer countries to exchange experiences and innovative ideas while stressing the role of natural gas in reducing environmental impacts.

During the meeting, participating countries emphasized increasing natural gas's share in the energy transition and prioritizing research and innovation in the industry, including adopting advanced technologies like carbon capture and storage.

Paknejad outlined various challenges faced by gas-producing nations, including economic sanctions, geopolitical issues, political tensions, and price volatility. These challenges not only impact gas production and trade but also threaten the investments needed for infrastructure development. Overcoming these hurdles, he said, requires international cooperation, advanced technologies, and long-term strategic policies.

Highlighting the global need for substantial investment in gas infrastructure and advanced technologies, the minister warned that insufficient funding could lead to supply shortages, price hikes, and decreased energy security. Key areas of investment include constructing new pipelines, LNG storage and transport facilities, and low-carbon technologies.

The GECF promotes natural gas as an environmentally friendly alternative to more polluting fuels like coal. It also focuses on leveraging technologies such as carbon capture to mitigate environmental impacts. Paknejad said natural gas, with its lower emissions and compatibility with renewable energy, is poised to play a central role in the energy transition.

The minister emphasized the transformative potential of advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, smart energy management systems, and carbon capture, in shaping the gas industry's future. These innovations, he said, not only reduce production and transmission costs but also enhance environmental sustainability and operational efficiency.

IRANNEWS/ECONOMIC DESK



## Gas Exporting Countries Emphasize the Central Role of Natural Gas in Economic Development

TEHRAN - The 26th Ministerial Meeting of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) concluded on Sunday evening in Tehran with a final statement reaffirming the central role of natural gas in driving global economic development.

Energy ministers and senior officials from GECF member states, including Algeria, Bolivia, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Iran, Libya, Nigeria, Qatar, Russia, Trinidad and Tobago, the UAE, and Venezuela, participated in the meeting. Observers from Azerbaijan, Iraq, Mauritania, Mozambique, and Senegal also attended, along with a high-ranking delegate from Oman as a special guest.

The gathering, hosted by Iran's Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad, aimed to enhance collaboration and solidarity among member states in addressing global energy challenges.

GECF members underscored the pivotal role of natural gas in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They emphasized its contribution to ending hunger, ensuring universal energy access, and guiding a fair, inclusive, and affordable energy transition.

The forum reiterated the importance of multilateral cooperation to tackle energy security challenges. Members highlighted the significance of maintaining unity among producers and adhering to objectives outlined in the Algiers Declaration from the 7th Summit of Heads of State and Government.

Members expressed deep concern over escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, particularly targeted actions against Iran. Such disruptions, they warned, threaten regional stability, global peace, and energy security. They also called for a just and lasting resolution to the Palestine issue, referencing a July 2024 advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice that deemed certain actions in the occupied Palestinian territories as violations of international law.

With record-high global natural gas consumption in 2023, the forum projected a 34% increase in demand by 2050, with natural gas's share in the global energy mix rising from 23% to 26%. Members stressed the need for timely investments in the gas value chain to ensure market stability and meet growing demand.

The forum highlighted the critical role of innovation and technology in optimizing gas production, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and bolstering energy resilience. It also emphasized the protection of gas infrastructure to ensure safe and uninterrupted supply.

The GECF conveyed condolences to victims of ongoing violence in the Middle East and reaffirmed their solidarity with the region's people. They called for enhanced dialogue and cooperation to address the humanitarian and energy implications of these conflicts.

Oman's participation was lauded as a significant step towards strengthening collaboration among gas-exporting countries. Members expressed optimism about Oman's potential membership and its contributions to the forum's objectives.

The statement emphasized the need for robust collaboration between producers and consumers, advocating for free, transparent, and non-discriminatory gas markets. GECF members also pledged to work with international organizations and UN entities to ensure sustainable and inclusive energy governance.

The forum commended the GECF Secretariat for its work in expanding membership, fostering dialogue, conducting studies, and advocating for natural gas's role in the global energy transition. They expressed appreciation for the promotion of gas at international events, including the upcoming COP29 climate conference.

Key decisions from the meeting included: Libya's Khalifa Abdulsadiq was elected chair for the 2025 Ministerial Meeting, with Iran's Mohsen Paknejad serving as vice-chair; Nigeria's Nicholas Agbo Ela and Iran's Afshin Javan were appointed as chair and vice-chair, respectively, of the GECF Executive Board for 2025; Doha, Qatar, was selected as the host for the 27th Ministerial Meeting in late 2025.

Russia will host the 8th GECF Summit in 2026. The final statement concluded with a firm commitment to leveraging natural gas as a cornerstone for economic development, social progress, environmental protection, and energy security. Members rejected calls for halting investments in fossil fuels, arguing that such actions could jeopardize energy security and market stability while undermining efforts to reduce global emissions.

The 26th Ministerial Meeting reflected the GECF's continued dedication to fostering cooperation among its members and addressing global energy challenges through strategic, inclusive, and environmentally conscious initiatives.

## Resumption of Fruit Exports to Saudi Arabia



TEHRAN - The Director General of International Affairs and Specialized Organizations at Iran's Ministry of Agriculture and Specialized Organizations announced that the Minister of Agriculture has taken steps to revive the export of Iranian fruits to Saudi Arabia. Given that agricultural products are not subject to sanctions, this trade could serve as a promising focus for bilateral commerce.

Hooman Fathi highlighted the potential for agricultural cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He stated that during the COP16 summit, the Iranian Minister of Agriculture held meetings with counterparts from Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. The meeting with the Saudi Minister of Environment and Agriculture marked a significant milestone in the collaboration between the two nations.

Fathi noted that Iran and Saudi Arabia share similar climatic conditions in some regions, allowing for the exchange of experiences. He added that while Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in developing its agricultural infrastructure and research in recent years, Iran also boasts advanced capabilities in the sector, paving the way for enhanced bilateral cooperation.

Before the diplomatic tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran had been exporting fruits to Saudi Arabia. Efforts are now underway to restore these ties. Fathi revealed that the two countries have agreed to establish two technical committees focusing on agriculture and desertification. These committees are expected to be formed within the next two months, with the first meeting scheduled to take place in Tehran.

Fathi identified apples, citrus fruits, dried fruits, seafood, food industry products, and saffron as highly demanded Iranian goods in the Saudi market, noting that these products are not locally produced in Saudi Arabia. He expressed optimism about resuming exports soon, emphasizing that agricultural products are exempt from sanctions and could become a key trade focus. Additionally, the presence of Iranian pilgrims in Saudi Arabia could provide a significant market for Iranian goods.

The Director General also noted Saudi Arabia's progress in producing vegetables, poultry (70% of its consumption), and fish (60% of its consumption), and its self-sufficiency in dairy production. However, both Iran and Saudi Arabia remain importers of livestock feed due to shared climatic conditions, with Iran being more advanced in this area.

## Non-Oil Trade Reaches \$83 Billion in Eight Months



TEHRAN - Iran's Customs Administration announced that in the first eight months of this year, the country's non-oil exports—excluding crude oil, fuel oil, kerosene, and suitcase trade—reached 103.558 million tons, valued at \$38.15 billion. This marks a 14.6% increase in volume and an 18% rise in value compared to the same period last year.

During the same period, imports totaled 24.525 million tons, valued at \$45.12 billion, showing a 1.7% decline in weight but a 6.1% increase in monetary value. Consequently, Iran's total non-oil foreign trade (imports and exports combined) surpassed 128.083 million tons, with a total value of \$83.279 billion.

In the first eight months of the year: China received \$9.8 billion worth of Iranian exports, accounting for 25.9% of the total; Iraq followed with \$8.3 billion (21.7%); United Arab Emirates (UAE): \$4.7 billion (12.4%); Turkey: \$4.4 billion (11.5%) and Afghanistan: \$1.5 billion (4%).

For imports, the UAE ranked first, providing \$13.6 billion worth of goods, representing 30.1% of the total. Other major suppliers included: China: \$11.5 billion (25.5%); Turkey: \$7.8 billion (17.4%); Germany: \$1.5 billion (3.4%) and Russia: \$1 billion (2.3%).

Additionally, Iran's foreign transit activities grew significantly, reaching 14.746 million tons—a 34.93% increase compared to the same period last year.

## Iran's Trade with Eurasia Reaches \$5b

Iran has witnessed remarkable growth in its trade ties with Eurasia, leveraging the benefits of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) agreement. According to Mirhadi Seyed, the Advisor for International Affairs and Trade Agreements at the Trade Development Organization of Iran, the country's exports in sectors covered by the agreement grew by an impressive 82% in the first year of its implementation.

The trade agreement, which started on November 26, 2019, and lasted for one year initially, has been pivotal in boosting Iran's trade and non-oil exports.

In a detailed interview, Seyed discussed the foundation and execution of the Eurasia trade agreement, highlighting its significant impact on Iran's trade sector. Citing World Trade Organization (WTO) data, he emphasized that over half of global exports are conducted between countries with existing trade agreements. These agreements lower trade barriers such as tariffs, customs regulations, and transportation challenges, paving the way for smoother and more robust international trade.

Seyed stressed the importance of Iran actively participating in international trade agreements to stay competitive globally. "More than half of global trade has already been facilitated through trade agreements, customs unions, or economic partnerships. Without similar frameworks, Iran risks lagging behind, leading to economic challenges," he said.

Initially, the preferential trade agreement with Eurasia was to remain active for a year, followed by negotiations to transition it into a free



trade agreement. The first year proved to be a resounding success, with an 82% increase in Iran's exports to Eurasian countries. This growth continued into the second year, with exports rising by over 40%. Import volumes, while slightly increasing, did not lead to significant complaints or disruptions.

Before the agreement, the total trade volume between Iran and five Eurasian countries stood at approximately \$2 billion. Today, this figure has surged to nearly \$5 billion, underscoring the agreement's effectiveness. Encouraged by these results, Iran began negotiating a free trade

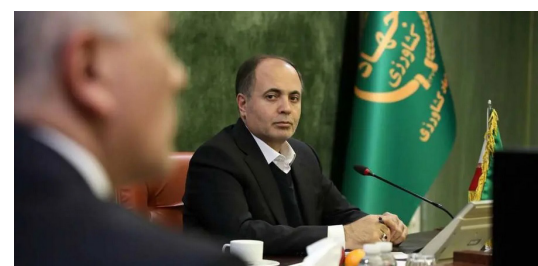
agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) on November 2, 2020. After over three years of negotiations, the deal was finalized and signed on December 25, 2023, in St. Petersburg.

The free trade agreement is expected to cover more than 87% of goods traded between the parties, with tariffs for these items reduced to zero. Seyed highlighted the transformative potential of this agreement in boosting trade volumes.

Seyed underscored the significance of this agreement, calling it a "landmark" for Iran's trade history. "Never before have we had an agreement eliminating tariffs on over 80% of traded items," he noted. The Eurasian market, with a population exceeding 160 million and substantial import demands, presents immense opportunities for Iran.

This agreement effectively establishes free trade deals with five countries, including Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, facilitating Iran's entry into a vast and lucrative market. The free trade agreement is anticipated to significantly ease Iran's trade activities and foster deeper economic integration with the region.

## Iran and Uzbekistan Discuss Barter of Potatoes and Legumes



TEHRAN - In a recent meeting in Tehran, representatives from Uzbekistan's Ministries of Agriculture, Trade, and Investment met with Iran's Minister of Agriculture, Jihad Gholamreza Nouri, to discuss enhancing bilateral cooperation. The talks focused on agricultural trade, potato imports, technology exchange, and the development of joint projects.

Highlighting Iran's strategic focus on strengthening ties with its neighbors, Nouri emphasized the pivotal role of Uzbekistan's President in fostering international relations. "This initiative provides significant opportunities for constructive collaboration between the two nations," he noted.

The discussions underscored opportunities for agricultural advancement, particularly in Uzbekistan's potato yield. Currently averaging 19 tons per hectare, Nouri suggested that with shared technological and managerial expertise, Uzbekistan could double this yield within three to four years. He also expressed Iran's readiness to supply agricultural machinery to Uzbekistan, suggesting that bilateral cooperation could include both direct exports and bartering goods such as potatoes and legumes.

Nouri further highlighted Iran's century-long experience in agricultural research, offering to share its knowledge and provide joint training opportunities for Uzbek experts.

Ibrahim Argashev, Uzbekistan's Deputy Minister and head of the Quarantine and Plant Protection Organization, stressed the importance of economic collaboration between the two countries. He expressed Uzbekistan's intent to strengthen trade ties with Iran and revealed plans to import potatoes directly from its neighbor.



## Ghana's Former President Wins Election

ACCRA (Dispatches) - Ghana's former President John Dramani Mahama has staged a political comeback by winning the West African nation's presidential election after his rival Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia conceded defeat on Sunday.

The result of Ghana's general election is another blow to a ruling party in a region where voters, hit by economic hardship, high inflation and local currency depreciation, have caused upsets as they seek changes in leadership.

Mahama, 66, who served as Ghana's president from 2012 to 2016, framed Bawumia as representing a continuation of the policies that led to Ghana's worst economic crisis in a generation.

The world's second biggest cocoa grower, and major gold-producing nation, reached a deal with the International Monetary Fund last year for a \$3 billion bailout after it defaulted on most of its international debt.

"I have, this morning, received a congratulatory call from my brother Dr. Bawumia, following my emphatic victory in Saturday's election. Thank you, Ghana," Mahama said in a post on X social media.

Addressing a press conference from his residence, Bawumia said he called Mahama to congratulate him, adding that Mahama's National Democratic Congress (NDC) also won the parliamentary election.



# IRAN NEWS

## Taiwan Raises Alert as China Deploys Ships in Possible Drills



TAIPEI (Dispatches) - Taiwan's military set up an emergency response center and raised its alert level on Monday, saying China has set up seven zones of reserved airspace and dispatched naval fleets and coast guard boats to waters around the island.

China, which claims democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory, had been expected to launch another round of exercises in response to Taiwan President Lai Ching-te's trip to the Pacific, which included stopovers in Hawaii and the U.S. territory of Guam, security sources had told Reuters.

China has set up seven "temporary reserved areas" of airspace to the east of its eastern Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, Taiwan's defense ministry said in a statement, adding those zones are valid from Monday to Wednesday.

Such zones are temporarily reserved and allocated for a particular user during a set period, though other flights can pass through with permission from controllers, according to international rules.

China's defense ministry did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

A Taipei security source told Reuters that China currently has nearly 90 navy and coast guard ships in waters near Taiwan, the southern Japanese islands and the East and South China Seas, of which around two-thirds were navy vessels.

Taiwan's military said it has activated its "combat readiness exercises" at strategic locations and its naval and coast guard boats are closely monitoring Chinese military activities.

"Any unilateral and irrational, provocative actions could seriously damage peace and stability in the Indo Pacific and that will not be welcomed by the international community," Taiwan's defence ministry said.

Taiwan's coast guard, in a separate statement, said that seven Chinese coast guard ships have been carrying out "grey-zone harassment" against the island since earlier in the day.

## Ousted Syrian Leader Assad Flees to Moscow After Rebels Capture Damascus

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - President Bashar al-Assad fled Syria as Islamist-led rebels swept into Damascus Sunday, triggering celebrations across the country and beyond at the end of his oppressive rule.

Russian news agencies said late Sunday that Assad and his family were in Moscow.

Crowds toured the ousted leader's luxurious home after the rebels declared he had fled, a spectacular end to five decades of brutal Baath party rule.

The government fell 11 days after the rebels began a surprise advance, more than 13 years after Assad's crackdown on anti-government protests ignited Syria's civil war -- which had become largely dormant until the rebel push.

"This victory, my brothers, is historic for the region," Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, leader of the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group (HTS) that spearheaded the advance, said in an address at the landmark Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

US President Joe Biden said Assad should be "held accountable" but called the nation's political upheaval a "historic opportunity" for Syrians to rebuild their country.

The fall of the regime is a fundamental act of justice," Biden said from the White House.

Residents cheered in the streets as the rebel factions heralded the departure of "tyrant" Assad, saying: "We declare the city of Damascus free."

Celebratory gunfire sounded along with shouts of, "Syria is ours and not the Assad family's."

AFP correspondents saw dozens of men, women and children wandering through Assad's modern, spacious home whose rooms had been stripped bare.

"I can't believe I'm living this moment," tearful Damascus resident Amer Batha told AFP by phone.

"We've been waiting a long time for this day," he said.

The rebel factions on Telegram proclaimed the end to "50 years of oppression under Baath rule, and 13 years of crimes and tyranny and displacement".

It is, they said, "the start of a new era for Syria."

The foreign ministry of Assad's key backer Russia had announced earlier Sunday that Assad had resigned from the presidency and left Syria.

The head of war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP: "Assad left Syria via Damascus international airport before the army security forces left" the facility.

Later Sunday, a Kremlin source told Russian news agencies that Assad and his family had arrived in Moscow where they

had been granted asylum "on humanitarian grounds".

Around the country, people toppled statues of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's father and the founder of the repressive system of government he inherited.

For the past 50 years in Syria, even the slightest suspicion of dissent could mean prison or death.

During their advance, the rebels said they had freed prisoners, including on Sunday at the Sednaya facility, notorious for the darkest abuses of Assad's era.

UN war crimes investigators urged those taking charge in the country to ensure the "atrocities" committed under Assad's rule are not repeated.

Amnesty International called this a "historic opportunity" for those responsible for the abuses in Syria to face justice.

The end of Assad's rule came just hours after HTS said it had captured the strategic city of Homs.

Homs was the third major city seized by the rebels, who began their advance on November 27, the same day a ceasefire took place in neighbouring Lebanon between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement.

Hezbollah had supported Assad during the long civil war but has been severely weakened by Israeli strikes.

Hezbollah forces "vacated their positions around Damascus", a source close to the group said Sunday.

HTS is rooted in the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda but has sought to soften its image in recent years. It remains listed as a terrorist organisation by Western governments.

The commander of the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which controls much of northeast Syria, hailed the fall of Assad's "authoritarian regime" as "historic".

A military council affiliated with the SDF clashed Sunday with Turkish-backed Syrian fighters in Syria's north, leaving 26 fighters from both sides dead, the Observatory said, as the Turkish-backed group launched an offensive on the Manbij area.

The Observatory said Israel had struck government security buildings and weapons depots Sunday on the outskirts of Damascus, as well as in the eastern Deir Ezzor province.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the overthrow of Assad was a "historic day in the... Middle East" and the fall of a "central link in Iran's axis of evil".

The UN envoy for Syria said the country was at "a watershed moment".

Turkey, which has historically backed the opposition, called for a "smooth transition".

## Romanian Far-Right Candidate Says Democracy "Cancelled" Along With Election



MOGOSOIA (Dispatches) - The Romanian far-right presidential candidate at the center of a Russian electoral meddling scandal turned up at the place he would have voted in on Sunday, saying the Constitutional Court's decision to cancel the ballot was fatal for democracy.

The court annulled the ongoing presidential election after accusations of Russian meddling and on Friday ruled the entire process, which had been due to conclude this weekend, would have to be re-run. Russia denies any interference in the process.

Sunday's second round would have pitted Calin Georgescu, a far-right, pro-Russian candidate who was ahead in the first round, against pro-European Union centrist leader Elena Lasconi.

On Sunday morning, Georgescu was greeted by a crowd of supporters and journalists at the school where he would have cast his vote.

"We shall continue in the democratic manner," he said, speaking in English. "I ask very clearly for peace, for all the things that we have to recuperate our democracy because democracy was cancelled with the court."

Meanwhile, in a letter dated Dec. 7 and posted on social media platform X late on Saturday, Lasconi told U.S. President-elect Donald Trump that she also feared democracy was in danger.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Donald Trump doubled down Sunday on hard-line campaign pledges to impose trade tariffs and carry out mass deportations, while dangling the idea that the United States could withdraw from NATO.

In his first formal television interview -- and just six weeks before he takes office -- Trump again signaled that US support for Ukraine will scale back, saying he will "probably" cut the aid helping Kyiv repel the Russian invasion.

Trump also said he would "very quickly" look at pardons for supporters jailed for storming the US Capitol after his 2020 election defeat to Joe Biden.

The interview on NBC's "Meet the Press with Kristen Welker" was taped Friday but aired Sunday, following Trump's meetings with the presidents of France and Ukraine over the weekend -- his first foreign trip since winning the November election against Biden.

Trump reiterated his familiar threat to leave NATO, the cornerstone of security in Europe since World War II, saying that US allies do not pay enough for their defense.

"If they're paying their bills, and if I think they're treating us fairly, the answer is absolutely I'd stay with NATO," said.

But there is also "absolutely" the possibility of America's departure, he

## Trump Discusses Cutting Ukraine Aid, Mass Deportations



He also stressed that his campaign promises of huge tariffs -- including against top US trading partners Canada, Mexico and China -- would be enacted.

"We're subsidizing Mexico and we're subsidizing Canada and we're subsidizing many countries all over the world," he said.

Vowing that "properly used" tariffs are "a very powerful tool," Trump added that he would not only wield them economically, "but also for getting other things outside of economics."

As to whether Americans would see higher prices as a result of those tariffs, Trump said that "I can't guarantee anything. I can't guarantee tomorrow."

Trump has a history of breaking with precedent to undermine the independence of the US Federal Reserve, but he promised not to replace Chairman Jerome Powell.

However, Trump said he would go ahead with what economists say could be the hugely disruptive mass deportation of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

"I think you have to do it, and it's a hard -- it's a very tough thing to do. But you have to have rules, regulations, laws. They came in illegally," he said.

He said he would end the constitutionally protected right to US citizenship for anyone born in the country, calling it "ridiculous." It is unclear how Trump would be able to do this but he suggested, "if we can, through executive action."

"We're going to have to get it changed. We'll maybe have to go back to the people. But we have to end it," Trump said.

## South Korea's Opposition Accuse Ruling party of Staging Second Coup

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's opposition on Monday accused the ruling party of staging a "second coup" by clinging to power and refusing to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol over his declaration of martial law.

Yoon plunged the country into political chaos with his attempt to scrap civilian rule, which lasted just six hours after lawmakers scuffled with soldiers in the parliament building and managed to vote the measure down, forcing Yoon into an embarrassing U-turn.

The president and a slew of top officials are now being investigated for insurrection, but a bid to impeach Yoon failed Saturday after a boycott by the ruling party, who claim the wildly unpopular leader has agreed to hand power to the prime minister and party chief.

"This is an unlawful, unconstitutional act of a second insurrection and a second coup," Democratic Party floor leader Park Chan-dae said, urging the ruling party to "stop it immediately".

Under South Korea's constitution, the president remains head of government and commander in chief of the army unless he or she is incapacitated, resigns or steps down.

In such a case, power would be handed to the prime minister on an interim basis, until elections could be held.

Claiming that Yoon can remain in office but has delegated his powers to the prime minister and leader of his ruling People Power Party -- who is not an elected official -- is "a blatant constitutional violation with no legal basis," Park said.

"Their attitude of placing themselves above the Constitution mirrors that of



insurrectionist Yoon Suk Yeol," he added.

Investigators have already detained the former defence minister, raided his offices, slapped a host of top officials with travel bans, and on Monday called in the general who was made martial law commander for further questioning.

Yoon himself could be called in for questioning, police said Monday, adding that they are "considering" whether to ban him from traveling, as their investigation gathered speed.

"There are no human or physical restrictions to the subject of an investigation," said Woo Jong-soo, head of the National Investigation Headquarters of the National Police Agency.

Police will investigate "in accordance with the law and principles -- without any exceptions".

The defence ministry confirmed Monday that the embattled Yoon remained at the head of the country's security apparatus, despite the apparent power vacuum in the country -- which remains technically at war with the nuclear-armed North.

"Legally, (control of military forces) currently lies with the commander in chief," defence ministry spokesperson Jeon Ha-kyou said.

Yoon, 63, has apologised for "anxiety and inconvenience" caused by his declaration of martial law but has not stepped down, saying instead he would entrust decisions about his fate to his party -- and accept all political and legal responsibility for the martial law fiasco.





## Chelsea's Epic Comeback Sinks Spurs

LONDON (Dispatches) - Chelsea roared back from two goals down to beat Tottenham 4-3, moving just four points behind Premier League leaders Liverpool after Arsenal were held by Fulham. The Gunners and Chelsea both started the day seven points adrift of Arne Slot's side, whose game this weekend was postponed due to stormy weather. Arsenal were forced to settle for a 1-1 draw but Enzo Maresca's Chelsea, kicking off later Sunday, mounted a stunning comeback at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. Dominic Solanke and Dejan Kulusevski put Spurs two goals up inside 11 minutes but Jadon Sancho quickly pulled one back with a fine strike and the second half belonged to the visitors. Cole Palmer equalised from the penalty spot in the 61st minute and Enzo Fernandez put Chelsea ahead 12 minutes later. Palmer's ice-cool "Panenka" spot-kick gave the visitors a two-goal cushion before Son Heung-min added a late third for Spurs. Second-placed Chelsea now have 31 points after 15 games, two points ahead of London rivals Arsenal. Liverpool, with a game in hand, are on 35 points. "The plan or the idea is to not let the players slow down," Maresca told Sky Sports. "They cannot drop because they know another player is waiting to come in." But the Italian, in his first season at Stamford Bridge, played down his team's title chances. "Arsenal, (Manchester) City and Liverpool probably don't slide like (Chelsea defender Marc) Cucurella did. To be serious, we are not ready, we are far from these teams but we focus on day-by-day and trying to

improve the team." The defeat is a disastrous result for under-pressure Spurs boss Ange Postecoglou, whose side hammered champions Manchester City 4-0 just two weeks ago. "It is a sore one, a painful one," said the Australian, whose team are now 11th in the Premier League table after their seventh defeat. Earlier, Bukayo Saka had a late winner ruled out for offside by a VAR review as the Gunners' four-match winning streak was halted in west London. Raul Jimenez fired Fulham into an early lead before William Saliba levelled after yet another Arsenal goal from a corner. "We are very disappointed not to win the game—overall we absolutely dominated the game from start to end," Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta told the BBC. "We did all the things that we wanted to do during the game and unfortunately we concede one goal in one shot. The way the team played, the way the team wanted to win, it was unbelievable." Arsenal were still without influential defensive pair Gabriel Magalhaes and Riccardo Calafiori through injury and Fulham exposed a makeshift left side of the Gunners' backline to take the lead. Kenny Tete's ball in behind was pounced on by Jimenez, who drove forward and fired brilliantly across David Raya into the far corner on 11 minutes. Arsenal underlined their threat from set-pieces when they scored twice from corners to beat Manchester United 2-0 in midweek.

## Tumler Gets Maiden World Cup Race Win at Age of 35



LONDON (Dispatches) - Swiss racer Thomas Tumler got his long-awaited maiden World Cup win at the age of 35 on Sunday, taming a challenging Beaver Creek course with a pair of pristine runs in a men's giant slalom. "I have no words at the moment; it's like a dream," said Tumler who joined the World Cup circuit in 2012 and had finished on the podium just three times in 123 previous races. Tumler had a combined time of two minutes 27.60 seconds, 0.12 seconds faster than Lucas Pinheiro Braathen who became the first Brazilian man to get a World Cup podium finish. Slovenian Olympic silver medalist Zan Kranjec (2:28.18) was third. Tumler's win completed a Swiss sweep this year at the Colorado resort, with Justin Murisier winning the downhill on Friday and Marco Odermatt Saturday's Super-G. Tumler led the standings after a flawless opening run in 1:16.24, more than half a second clear of the rest of the field. Braathen refused to let him run away with the victory, however, shaving nearly seven seconds off his own opening-leg time to finish his second run in 1:10.41 and take brief control of the top of the leaderboard. Braathen, who was born in Oslo and previously skied for Norway, changed allegiance after briefly retiring a year ago and was overcome with emotion when it became clear he would get on to the podium. Tumler's skis wobbled midway through his final run but the Swiss held his nerve, doing just enough to hold off the rest of the field before cheering and collapsing on to the snow in joyous celebration.

## Norris Leads McLaren to First Constructors' Title in 26 Years

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Lando Norris led the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix from start to finish on Sunday to end McLaren's 26-year wait for a Formula One constructors' title. The Briton delivered in style after Australian team mate Oscar Piastri tangled with Red Bull's quadruple world champion Max Verstappen at the first corner and dropped to the back of the field. Piastri finished 10th, with Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc second and third for Ferrari, McLaren's historic rivals over the decades and the only team that could have beaten them to the championship. "You all deserve this. Thank you so much. It's been a special year," said Norris over the team radio after taking the chequered flag for his fourth win of the season. "Next year is going to be my year too." The 25 points, and Piastri's one, left McLaren 14 clear of Ferrari and champions for the first time since 1998. Norris finished the season as overall runner-up. Seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton finished fourth in his last race for Mercedes, starting 16th and overtaking team mate George Russell on the 58th and final lap. He joins Leclerc, who made stunning progress through the field after starting 19th, at Ferrari next season. "Lewis, that was the drive of a world champion," said Mercedes boss Toto Wolff, who could at least take some consolation in McLaren winning with the German manufacturer's engines.



Hamilton was 14 seconds behind Russell, but on medium tyres compared to his team mate's hards, with 15 laps to go but was told he could catch him. He did it six corners from the end, Russell putting up little resistance and clapping Hamilton at the finish. The 39-year-old then saluted the crowd with some tyre-smoking spins to mark the end of the most successful driver and team pairing in Formula One history. "What started as a leap of faith turned into a journey into the

history books," Hamilton said over the team radio. Verstappen, who took his fourth successive drivers' title in Las Vegas last month, was sixth after collecting a 10-second penalty for the collision with Piastri. Pierre Gasly was seventh for Alpine, who won their midfield battle to finish sixth overall in the standings, with Nico Hulkenberg eighth for Haas and Fernando Alonso ninth for Aston Martin. McLaren were the first team of the current engine era that started in 2014 to win the title as a customer rather than a factory team. There was drama from the start as Verstappen and Piastri clashed, after McLaren had locked out the front row in qualifying but with Verstappen right behind in fourth slot. Both cars spun while Norris made a clean getaway from pole position and sped away. Verstappen said he had been "super unlucky", and claimed to have been all the way up the inside of the McLaren into the first corner but the evidence suggested he was at fault. "Move of a world champion, that one," commented Piastri sarcastically, before he was also given a 10-second penalty for running into the back of Franco Colapinto's Williams. Verstappen served his penalty on lap 30, dropping from third to 11th and seemingly taking a pop at the stewards over the radio. "Could we ask for 20 seconds, stupid idiots," said the Dutch driver, who was given two 10-second penalties in Mexico in October.

## Mbappe Insists Love for France Remains Despite Being Left Out



PARIS (Dispatches) - Kylian Mbappe said he is remained committed to the French national team despite not being called up for recent games, and that he respected the decisions made by coach Didier Deschamps. "The French team has always been the highest rank in football, it's the national team. I've always said there's nothing more important. My love for the French team hasn't changed," Mbappe said in an interview with Canal+. "I've always given my all," added the France captain, who has not featured for the Les Bleus since two Nations League games in early September. "You serve your country and that's it... I always held the French national team to the highest level. I did everything possible to represent it as best as possible." The 25-year-old striker has been hailed as one of the world's best players and moved to Spanish giants Real Madrid in July. He has 86 caps for France but was not included in the squads for their more recent Nations League fixtures in October and November. "I can't talk about November because it was a decision from the coach (Deschamps) and I'll get behind what he said. I fully respect his decision because he is the boss. I wanted to go but I can't say why," he said. Real have struggled at the start of the season and face the threat of elimination from the Champions League group stage, sitting 24th and last in the play-off spots. "It's not the best start to the season, either collectively or individually. We're preparing for the moments that will count. It hasn't met expectations but at Real you're expected to perform in the second half of the season," Mbappe said. The football calendar has become a major concern for elite players, with the increasing number of fixtures potentially contributing to injuries, a concern shared by Mbappe. "In the NBA (National Basketball Association), they get four months off. We get two weeks. And in the second week, we're already back to running. It's not a vacation," he said. The impact of such a demanding schedule has clearly weighed on him, especially after Euro 2024, much of which he played with a face mask after breaking his nose and where he asked to go off during extra time in France's quarter-final because of fatigue. France went out in the last four. "I was tired. I wanted to stay because you give everything for the French team but it was exhausting," Mbappe said.

## Davis Powers Lakers Past Blazers to End 3-Game Skid

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Anthony Davis recorded 30 points, 11 rebounds and five blocked shots to help the Los Angeles Lakers cruise to a 107-98 victory over the visiting Portland Trail Blazers. D'Angelo Russell achieved season bests of 28 points and 14 assists for the Lakers, who played without LeBron James (foot). Rui Hachimura added 23 points and four steals for Los Angeles, which halted a three-game losing streak. Shaedon Sharpe scored 19 points and Deandre Ayton had 14 points and a season-high 19 rebounds before fouling out for the Trail Blazers, who lost their fourth straight game and eighth of their past 10. Fernnee Simons also scored 14 points, while Scoot Henderson and Deni Avdija added 13 apiece. The Lakers created distance in the fourth quarter when Russell made two 3-pointers and Cam Reddish hit one during a 9-0 spurt that gave the Lakers a 97-81 advantage with 7:14 to play. Hachimura and Davis added 3-pointers as the advantage grew to 103-85 with 5:31 to play. The lead topped out at 20 points as the Lakers won for just the third time in their past 10 games. Los Angeles made 45.8 percent of its shots, including 13 of 34 from 3-point range. Russell made five from beyond the arc. Austin Reaves (back/pelvis) missed his fifth straight game for Los Angeles. Jerami Grant finished with just three points on 1-of-12 shooting as



Portland shot 41.7 percent overall and 9 of 36 from 3-point range. Portland's Robert Williams III (concussion) missed his sixth straight game. The Trail Blazers were behind by 14 points at halftime before scoring the first nine points of the second half to move within 59-54 on a three-point play by Simons. The Lakers answered with a 9-2 run, which was capped by Dalton Knecht's dunk that pushed Los Angeles' lead to 68-56 with 4:50 left in the third. Henderson intercepted Russell's long pass in the final seconds of the quarter, dribbled to midcourt and hit the 48-foot shot to bring Portland within 77-74 as time expired in the third. The Blazers led 35-27 after Avdija's basket with 8:43 left in the first half before Los Angeles scored 15 straight points to start a 30-8 surge. Max Christie and Gabe Vincent capped the stretch with back-to-back 3-pointers for a 57-43 advantage. The Lakers led 59-45 at the break behind 18 points from Davis and 16 from Hachimura. Sharpe had 12 in the half for the Trail Blazers.