

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei Says the Courageous Youth of Syria Will Definitely Liberate the Occupied Parts of Their Country

# IRAN NEWS

EU Spokesperson Described the Legitimate response of Iran to the Unconstructive Resolution of the Board of Governors (BoG) of the IAEA Against the Country's Peaceful Nuclear Program as "Extremely Concerning," Calling for a Halt to the Enrichment of Uranium to 60% in Iran

## 2 DOMESTIC

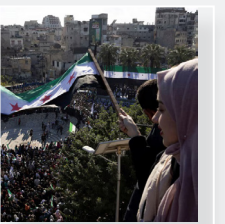


### Trade Relations Between Iran and Turkey Set to Expand

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### Mass Rallies Across Syria Celebrate End of Assad



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### Syria Facing Difficult Test From Terrorists, U.S.-Israeli Aggression



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says Syria is facing a tough test, highlighting threats posed by terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and Daesh as well as the Israeli-U.S. aggression.

"Today, Syria faces a difficult test. The threat posed by the movements of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh has heightened regional concerns, raising fears that the terrorists may turn Syria into their safe haven," wrote Araqchi in a note published by the Lebanese daily Al-Akbar.

The "aggressions and military interventions" by the Zionist regime, the US, and their regional allies have created significant challenges, he added. Araqchi termed the interventions as "irreparable strategic miscalculations" that expose the objective behind them.

"The clear objective of these aggressions and interventions is the destruction of Syria's social foundations, scientific assets, economic infrastructure, and defensive capabilities," he said.

"There is no doubt that the Islamic world is extremely worried about the future of the West Asian region, given the conditions that the Levant and Palestine are in," he added.

Araqchi said, "Despite the hardships and the blows caused from the invasion of Syria by foreign armies, there are evidently people of the quality of Syrian people in the country's neighborhood who bravely and heroically resisted two months of ground and aerial assaults by the Zionist army in the small Jabalia camp with empty hands but admirable spirit and faith."

The minister touched on the expansion of the Israeli regime's "barbaric crimes" and their extension to Syria, which began immediately after the fall of the Assad government.

"A question to ask is who is responsible for Israel's encroachment on the territory of a country that is internally struggling with the difficult conditions of the fall of one government and the birth of another?" he wrote.

### Iran Calls for Expulsion of Israel From UN Over Crimes, Aggression



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran has called on the United Nations to reconsider Israel's membership in the world body over violations of international law as the regime continues its genocidal war on Gaza.

Iran's Permanent Representative to the UN Amir Saied Irvani made the remarks at the 10th Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly on illegal Israeli actions in occupied Palestine.

He said Israel is "intentionally" disregarding United Nations resolutions that oblige the regime to end its occupation of Palestinian land and settlement construction activities, as well as stop discrimination against Palestinians and allow their return to their homeland.

"The violation of international law, including human and humanitarian right law, that is repeated by Israel on numerous occasions, is a true threat to international peace and security," he added.

"We consider this situation as a systematic failure by the Israeli regime to meet its membership conditions at the United Nations. We believe that Israel's illegal acts should prompt all UN members to reconsider this regime's membership ..., in accordance with Article 6 of the Charter."

Irvani also noted that a reconsideration of Israel's UN membership would help the implementation of international resolutions, and expedite the realization of Palestinians' rights to self-determination and a sovereign state.

He further condemned Israel's non-compliance with the UN resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire in the regime's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip.



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### No Barrier Created for Agency Oversight

TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Mohammad Eslami, stated that cooperation between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continues based on a joint statement made in March 2023, within a framework aimed at resolving remaining ambiguities without any hindrances.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the unveiling of a domestically produced high-power radio frequency generator based on S-band magnetron technology, Eslami addressed recent reports suggesting that Iran has accepted increased oversight of its nuclear activities by the IAEA. He remarked, "When we conduct nuclear activities, it is natural that with changes in scale and capacity, the level of oversight and inspections will also change."

He continued, "We operate according to the frameworks and regulations of the agency, and it is understandable that when three units advance to five units, the level of oversight should increase accordingly. This is not an unreasonable expectation. Unfortunately, certain factions, particularly Zionist elements, strive to instill fear regarding Iran's nuclear program."

In response to inquiries about a new modality for resolving issues and ambiguities between Iran and the IAEA following a recent resolution at the Board of Governors, Eslami confirmed that there was a joint statement regarding cooperation in March 2023 in Tehran. He emphasized that the relationship between Iran and the agency is framed by safeguards and the NPT, and discussions have been established to resolve questions concerning four locations, which have now been narrowed down to two. "We have responded to these inquiries, which have stemmed from fabricated claims by the Zionist regime," he added.

Eslami noted that both parties have agreed for their deputies to extract a modality for this cooperation, which is currently ongoing. He stated, "To this day, the agency has consistently had

access for its oversight in accordance with safeguards and the NPT, and we have not created any barriers to this oversight, nor will we."

Regarding research activities at the Atomic Energy Organization, Eslami highlighted the organization's open-door policy towards members of the public, students, and experts, stating that efforts have been made to present achievements through various methods to facilitate commercialization.

He discussed the country's development of linear accelerators, which have applications in medical and industrial fields. Previously, these were imported, but now components are being produced domestically within a knowledge-based framework, with collaborative efforts in place with medical and agricultural research centers.

Eslami also announced that the Atomic Energy Organization is distributing 69 radiopharmaceutical products to hospitals and radiation therapy centers across the country.

He mentioned the ongoing initiative to produce 20,000 megawatts of nuclear electricity, expressing hope that this capacity will be fully achieved by 2041. He emphasized that the efficiency of nuclear power plants is close to 100%, and their waste is recyclable and reusable.

Concerning the Nuclear Science and Technology Research Institute, Eslami noted that it is pursuing development in collaboration with universities and knowledge-based companies.

Furthermore, he indicated the need for using nuclear energy in agriculture to optimize water and soil conditions, enhancing crop yields while minimizing water usage and maintaining soil resilience. He expressed hope that by utilizing nuclear technology, Iran's agricultural sector could gain competitive advantages and increase the nation's share in exports.

### Gov't Prioritizes 8% Economic Growth

TEHRAN - The President has stated that addressing imbalances in fuel, energy, and petrochemical feedstock, along with achieving an 8% economic growth, are top priorities for the government. He emphasized that extensive discussions have taken place with academics on these issues.

In a visit to the Industry and Mining Capabilities Exhibition for 8% economic growth, President Masoud Pezeshkian, a government spokesperson, spent three hours exploring the exhibition held in Shah-e-Aftab. He was accompanied by Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, Seyyed Mohammad Atabak, and Head of the President's Office, Mohsen Haji Mirza.

During the visit, industrial associations and organizations voiced their concerns regarding challenges in finance, energy imbalances including electricity, water, gas, oil, mining, steel, and exports. The primary issue highlighted by these groups was related to energy imbalances.

Pezeshkian stated after the exhibition tour, "We held discussions regarding the activities in the private sector, specifically in the oil, gas, petrochemical, and mining industries. We listened to their problems and the obstacles they face."

He noted that some challenges require greater transparency, signaling readiness to facilitate separate meetings with various industries to address these barriers.

The President emphasized the government's role in creating the appropriate environment, stating, "Resolving imbalances concerning fuel and energy and petrochemical feedstock and achieving an 8% economic growth are our priorities. We have held many sessions with academia in this regard."

Pezeshkian further asserted, "To achieve 8% growth, collaboration from producers, industrial stakeholders, the private sector, and the public is essential, alongside a re-evaluation



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of our policies and outlook."

He also highlighted that the current consumption practices in offices, industries, and households are substandard, leading to inefficiencies, noting that Iran consumes three times the global average of fuel.

Meanwhile later and during his visit to the 25th Exhibition of Research Achievements, Technology, and Innovation Market, President Pezeshkian evaluated the role of universities in the country's educational landscape. During his time at the booth of the Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, he emphasized the need

for universities to transition to third and fourth-generation institutions. He called for an assessment of whether the country requires a significant number of students and universities.

The exhibition, which also featured the 12th Iran-Made Exhibition, was inaugurated yesterday (Friday, December 23) at the permanent venue for international exhibitions, with the presence of the Minister of Science, Research, and Technology, along with the Vice President for Science, Technology, and Knowledge-Based Economy.

President Pezeshkian toured both exhibitions, unveiling the latest achievements of researchers and innovators present. At the booth of the Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, he articulated his expectations for the organization, which he described as a think tank for higher education. Pezeshkian stressed that the institute should analyze and report on the necessity and rationale behind the abundance of universities and students in the country across various fields, including engineering and law.

According to the Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, he also emphasized the importance of aligning the transformations occurring within Iranian universities with global trends, advocating for practical engagement with third and fourth-generation university models.

### Inefficiency Must Not Ground Competent Workers



TEHRAN - Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref raised concerns on Sunday about the unwarranted sidelining of competent officials in the government during a meeting with members of the Reform Front in southwestern Tehran. He emphasized the importance of recognizing the contributions of skilled individuals rather than disregarding their efforts when new administrations take charge.

Speaking at a friendly gathering, Aref questioned, "Why should efficient leaders and employees be forced into inactivity without cause?" He reflected on earlier government transitions where incoming administrations brought their own teams, leaving behind experienced personnel without appreciation for their past contributions.

In the context of a "National Unity Government," Aref extended an invitation to all political activists, regardless of their affiliations—be they reformists or conservatives—to come forth and collaborate in addressing pressing issues, including inefficiencies and resource shortages. He acknowledged that the country is grappling with serious problems that have exceeded estimates, but he expressed confidence in the government's commitment to a solution without resorting to negative portrayals.

During the meeting, held with representatives from Islamshahr, Baharestan, and Rabat Karim, Aref highlighted the significance of political collaboration beyond party lines. He urged all activists to unite in support of the government to devise solutions for the myriad challenges facing the nation.

Aref clarified that the government does not intervene proactively in the appointment of managers, following directives from the President, but will step in if a manager is deemed unsuitable. He pointed out that the selection of governors took three months due to this cautious approach.

The Vice President further revealed plans for collaboration with former government ministers, showcasing a commitment to inclusive dialogue as they strive for a more effective governance model. He explained that the government is resolute in defeating inflation while promoting production and improving resource allocation.

### Iraq Ready to Thwart Any Hostile Plot After Assad's Fall



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - The head of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), also known as Hashd al-Sha'abi, has stressed his country's readiness to confront any hostile plot after the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government.

Iraq is "preparing for" any possible field developments, the chairman of Hashd al-Sha'abi, Falih al-Fayyadh, said in a statement on Friday.

He stressed that the Iraqi army, law enforcement forces and PMU fighters have made joint efforts to maintain security along the border with Syria and are on high alert.

"We were keen not to interfere [in the Syrian affairs], and, God willing, we will remain that way."

However, he said, "We will spare no effort to deter anyone who dares to violate Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Fayyadh noted that Iraq is now different from what it was 10 years ago when Takfiri terrorists began their campaign of terror in the country, with security forces being supported by the entire nation, and the Hashd al-Sha'abi popular forces becoming "a great power."

Fayyadh stressed the importance of unity among the Iraqi people to confront any hostile plot, urging the nation to be aware of the dangers posed by terrorist groups to the country. Elsewhere in his speech, Fayyadh stressed that Baghdad is seeking to find a solution "that contributes to the stability of Syria," while the Israeli regime is trying to turn Syria into a "quasi-state, without the shield of its army."

After 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 on Sunday, Israel swiftly moved in and seized the so-called buffer zone separating the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from the Syrian land.



### Azerbaijan Embassy in Iran Resumes Consular Services

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Azerbaijan foreign ministry announced that the consular department of the Azeri embassy in Iran will officially resume its activities on December 15, 2024.

The Azerbaijan embassy announced in a statement that the resumption of consular services indicates the continuity of services for Azerbaijani citizens and other people.

In July, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan announced in a statement that following the negotiations, the embassy of this country in Tehran resumed its activities in a new location on July 15, 2024.

According to the statement of this ministry, the current ambassador and diplomatic staff of the Republic of Azerbaijan had returned to Iran.

### Iran Urged to Enhance Domestic Policies for Attracting Foreign Investment



TEHRAN - Addressing the Kish Expo, aimed at inviting investors to Iran and showcasing the country's commercial and investment opportunities, Ali Aghamohammadi, Head of the Economic Group at the Office of the Supreme Leader, emphasized the need for suitable frameworks to attract foreign investors and optimize the country's investment potential.

Highlighting the importance of facilitating trade and establishing common gateways at borders to expedite trade processes and reduce costs, Aghamohammadi noted that economic studies have already been conducted on creating these joint border gateways, with only updates required. He cited a successful experience in collaboration with Turkey as a positive example.

Aghamohammadi suggested that similar methods could be applied at other borders. He also mentioned opportunities for collaboration with Qatar in the field of overseas agriculture—where studies by Qatari experts in Hormozgan and Chabahar have been beneficial—as well as joint shrimp production projects with Persian Gulf countries and mineral cooperation with Afghanistan.

Describing trade as a mutually beneficial activity, Aghamohammadi stressed the need for discussions and strategies on finding equilibrium points in international trade relations. He further stated that it is unnecessary for each country to operate independently in sectors like knowledge-based industries and the metaverse, suggesting that they could collectively approach larger markets with lower investments.



### Trade Relations Between Iran and Turkey Set to Expand

TEHRAN - In a significant meeting today, Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Mohammad Atabak discussed the potential for enhanced trade relations with Turkish Minister of Trade Omer Bolat, along with his accompanying delegation. The dialogue highlighted the strategic economic position both nations hold in the region and pointed out that the current trade volume between Iran and Turkey falls short of expectations, given the rich historical and cultural ties that bind the two countries.

Atabak expressed optimism regarding agreements reached through a joint cooperation commission, stating that this initiative marks an essential initial step toward expanding trade between Tehran and Ankara. He emphasized that strengthening bilateral economic relations could play a crucial role in enhancing overall trade flows.

Responding to Bolat's inquiry about the development of border crossing activities, Atabak assured that the Iranian government has devised a comprehensive plan to increase the operational hours and efficiency of border crossings and transit routes. He noted that as trade volumes rise, the implementation of facilitative programs will accelerate, contributing significantly to the roadmap established with the Iranian Trade Development Organization for boosting trade relations.

The Minister further welcomed the establishment of specialized commissions to address bilateral issues, indicating that many existing trade-related challenges could be effectively resolved through the Iranian Trade Development Organization's efforts.

Addressing the issue of preferential trade agreements between the two nations, Atabak pointed out that while the existing contract was time-bound, opportunities exist to review its provisions and enhance the extent of preferential trading. He suggested that mapping out a strategic plan in

collaboration with the Trade Development Organization could serve as a starting point for this process.

Atabak highlighted the formation of joint border committees as a precursor to resolving various border-related issues and facilitating the exchange of goods between the neighboring countries. He also noted that alleviating certain tariff restrictions could act as a catalyst for increasing trade exchanges between Iran and Turkey.

In closing, Atabak emphasized the numerous industrial advantages presented by both nations and reiterated Iran's readiness to bolster its cooperation with its brotherly country, Turkey.

On the Turkish side, Minister Bolat echoed concerns regarding the current trade volume, indicating it does not meet mutual expectations. He expressed confidence that with revisions to cooperation methods and agreements with the Iranian Trade Development Organization, there would be an improvement in economic and trade exchanges between the two countries.

Bolat extended an invitation to Atabak to attend the upcoming Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) summit to be hosted by Turkey, emphasizing the necessity to foster Turkey-Iran trade relations within the framework of bilateral agreements and interactions with Islamic countries.

He identified the collaboration between Turkey and Iran in equipping border crossings, enhancing road infrastructure, removing transit restrictions, and overcoming tariff barriers as pivotal elements for the development of Tehran-Ankara cooperation.

The ECO summit is scheduled to take place in the spring of next year in Turkey, where ministers from member countries will gather to further discuss collaboration opportunities.

### Need for Engineering Services Exports to Qatar Intensified



TEHRAN - Khorshid Gazderazi, Vice President of the Iran-Qatar Joint Chamber of Commerce, discussed the upcoming Joint Commission meeting between Iran and Qatar, scheduled to take place from December 11 to 14. He indicated that the Iranian Minister of Energy will represent President Ebrahim Raisi at the event, with the Qatari Minister of Commerce also expected to attend. This meeting marks a continuation of a decade-long tradition alternating between Doha and Tehran.

Gazderazi emphasized the significant role of the private sector in this meeting, despite it being initiated by the governments involved. The participation aims to focus on the economic potentials of both nations while seeking to facilitate trade and investment. However, he acknowledged that challenges such as sanctions against Iran often hinder open negotiations regarding joint collaborations and investments.

This year, Doha will host the event with a delegation of 40 from Iran set to attend.

In a related matter, Gazderazi noted the ongoing closure of Iran's commercial center in Qatar, which has struggled to perform cohesively since its inception. He pointed out that the center's operations should have been managed by the private sector, which is capable of handling trade, while the government's role should be purely supervisory. He mentioned that excessive government involvement has led to the center's current ineffective state.

Discussing the latest trade dynamics, Gazderazi highlighted that Iran's exports to Qatar mainly consist of agricultural products, minerals, and construction materials. However, he stressed the significant potential for exporting technical and engineering services to Qatar, enriched by their value addition. He expressed hope for the beginning of such exports, noting the presence of formidable competitors in the Qatari market, including Egyptian, Indian, and Bangladeshi firms. Currently, around 2 million expatriates are providing both hardware and software services to the 500,000-strong native Qatari population.

### Iran Needs FATF Membership to Increase Share in Global Trade



TEHRAN - The improvement of Iran's economic environment and business climate has been a key promise of the current administration led by Minister Mohsen Pezeshkian. To fulfill this promise, joining the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is considered essential. Currently, Iran has implemented 39 out of the 41 FATF requirements, with only two conditions regarding the Palermo and CFT agreements pending resolution. These issues have been under discussion for years within the Expediency Discernment Council.

Abdolnaser Hemmati, the Minister of Economy in the fourteenth government, emphasized the importance of Iran's membership in the FATF. He stated that the president is determined to resolve the FATF issue and that they are exploring specific solutions. Hemmati pointed out that the U.S. hopes Iran remains on the FATF blacklist, and without exiting this list, Iran's ability to engage in smooth banking and financial transactions at both regional and international levels will be significantly hindered, limiting its investment attraction and access to the global value chain.

Additionally, Samad Hassanzadeh, president of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, discussed the necessity of FATF membership in enhancing Iran's share in international markets and facilitating financial transactions. He remarked that FATF is widely recognized globally, and while most of its requirements are being met in Iran, the Islamic Republic must comply with certain programs in its economic actions.

Hassanzadeh stressed the importance of accepting FATF membership for economic growth and argued that joining FATF could benefit the economy and strengthen Iran's international relations. He cited recent government reports on the steps taken towards joining FATF and noted that the current administration is coordinating efforts to resolve FATF-related issues for economic actors and the nation's economy.

He also mentioned the possibility of the FATF issue being withdrawn from the Expediency Discernment Council, asserting that while this matter is being examined there, previous discussions indicate a clear need for coordinated resolution among all decision-makers and officials to increase Iran's share of global markets. He reiterated the country's need for FATF membership to expand international trade relations.

### Importance of Trade With Iran Highlighted by EAEU Minister



TEHRAN - The Minister of Trade of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) emphasized the significance of the recently established free trade agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran, stating that Iran serves as a key partner on the southern borders of the EAEU and plays a crucial role in the North-South corridor.

In an interview with the Izvestia news agency on Friday, Andrei Slepnev noted that Iran has made substantial achievements in areas such as import substitution, technological advancement, and resilience against sanctions pressures.

When asked if all EAEU member countries had ratified the free trade agreement with Iran, signed a year ago, Slepnev replied that efforts are actively underway to expand their free trade agreements. He mentioned that the ratification process for the latest agreement with Iran has been completed in four member countries of the union.

Slepnev highlighted the EAEU's intention to have a ratified agreement approved by member countries at the upcoming summit in St. Petersburg at the end of December 2024, with implementation expected to begin at the start of the following year.

In another part of the discussion, Slepnev commented that, by the end of 2024, the share of Global South countries in the EAEU's trade exchanges will reach 75%. This signifies a complete restructuring of the union's trade priorities, moving focus from Western countries to those in the Global South.

He noted that in 2022, the European Union accounted for over 40% of the EAEU's trade, while the Global South's share was less than half. However, that has now changed, with the share of European partners declining significantly to about 2.5 times less. The share from Global South countries has been steadily increasing, and it is projected to reach 75% of trade turnover by the end of 2024.

Slepnev pointed out that China is now the EAEU's primary partner, constituting just over one-third of its total foreign trade. With a remarkable growth expected in trade by the end of 2023, it is

anticipated that trade between the EAEU and China will rise by 3% by 2025. He also mentioned that 95% of the settlements with China are conducted in national currencies.

The EAEU Trade Minister noted significant increases in trade with other partners, including Turkey, India, the United Arab Emirates, and Brazil, predicting that trade with Turkey and India could reach \$60 billion by the end of 2024. He highlighted a significant rise in national currency settlements in trade with India, expecting that over 65% will be settled in national currencies by the year's end.

Additionally, a free trade agreement with Mongolia is expected to be signed in December, which will likely double trade volumes between the two countries. The EAEU also plans to strengthen cooperation with African nations, with trade with Tunisia currently on the rise.

Slepnev emphasized that the EAEU is focused on digitalizing processes, mentioning that 90 to 95% of transportation processes in Russia and Belarus are conducted using paperless technologies.

The Eurasian Economic Union, comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, was established approximately ten years ago in 2014. Uzbekistan, Moldova, and Cuba are observer members. In 2024, the EAEU signed a free trade agreement with Iran, which is pending ratification by the parliaments of the member countries and the Iranian Parliament. According to the EAEU, four out of five countries involved in the agreement have completed their parliamentary approval processes.

Once finalized, the agreement will allow around 87% of Iranian exports to EAEU member states to be conducted tariff-free, with reciprocal benefits for exports from EAEU countries to Iran.

The EAEU press service previously reported an 11% increase in trade volume between the union and the Islamic Republic of Iran during the first nine months of 2024 compared to the previous year. This growth occurs amid expectations for Iran's acceptance as an observer member during the EAEU summit in January 2025.

### International Health Tourism Conference to Be Hosted by Hamedan in 2025



TEHRAN - In a recent coordination meeting, it was announced that the city of Hamedan, Iran, will host the International Health Tourism Conference for member countries of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) next year. The event, scheduled for October, will span three days and feature participation from over ten ECO member nations.

Seyyed Mojtaba Hosseini, a senior economic official in Hamedan province, highlighted the region's unique potential in health tourism, emphasizing the necessity for Hamedan's resources and capabilities in this sector to be effectively showcased during the conference. The region is home to over 1,900 historical sites and natural attractions, posing an opportunity to enhance economic growth through health tourism.

Hosseini stressed the importance of establishing specialized committees and a strategic council to maximize the event's productivity. He acknowledged the significant role of the private sector in health tourism, expressing hope that private entities would take a leading role in the event's organization, although the Ministry of Health will provide support. Financing for the conference will primarily come from private stakeholders.

The official noted that the tourism industry, following oil and automotive industries, ranks third in economic impact and foreign currency generation for countries. He pointed out that over 90% of patients' companions engage in tourism activities, making Hamedan an attractive destination for health tourists due to its vast historical and recreational offerings.

Hosseini reaffirmed that Hamedan possesses extensive healthcare capacity and can effectively position itself as a key destination for health tourism in Iran. He remarked on the significance of medical tourism, the most prevalent and sensitive sub-branch of health tourism, and emphasized the need for cultural heritage and medical university collaboration to arrange specialized panels, workshops, and exhibitions during the ECO members' visit.

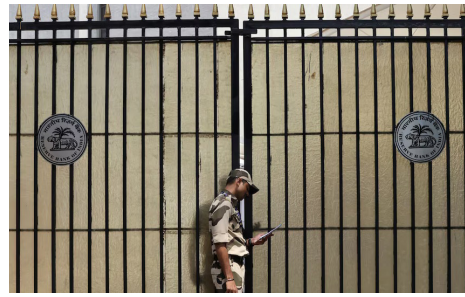
## Indian Police Say Probing Bomb Threat to Central Bank in Mumbai

MUMBAI (Dispatches) - Police in India's financial capital Mumbai said that they were investigating a bomb threat to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) after it received an email in Russian warning of an explosive attack.

The warning was sent to the official email address of newly appointed RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra, a senior Mumbai police officer said.

"We have registered a case, and the investigation is ongoing," the officer said.

Schools, railway stations, airports and airlines in India have been subject this year to hundreds of bomb threats that have turned out to be hoaxes.



## Georgia Crisis Deepens as New Far-Right President Set to Be Appointed



TBILISI (Dispatches) - Georgia's political crisis deepened Friday, as new pro-Europe protests gripped Tbilisi ahead of the controversial nomination of a far-right government loyalist as president.

The Black Sea nation has been in turmoil since the governing Georgian Dream party claimed victory in contested October parliamentary elections. Its decision last month to delay EU accession talks ignited a fresh wave of mass rallies.

More unrest is expected on Saturday, when Georgian Dream is set to appoint far-right former footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili as president in a disputed election process.

On Friday, demonstrations rocked the capital, Tbilisi, for the 16th consecutive day, as thousands of pro-EU protesters filled the streets, marching in a dozen different locations before gathering in the evening outside parliament.

Speaking to AFP at a rally, Dariko Gogol, 53, said Georgian Dream "rigged the election, and they are just dragging us towards Russia".

"We need new elections," she said, adding that current President Salome Zurbishvili "has to stay (as president) and somehow guide us in this really difficult situation".

On Saturday, an electoral college controlled by Georgian Dream was expected to elect Kavelashvili as president in an indirect vote in parliament boycotted by the opposition.

Zurbishvili has refused to step down and is demanding new parliamentary elections, paving the way for a constitutional showdown.

"What will happen in parliament tomorrow is a parody—it will be an event entirely devoid of legitimacy, unconstitutional and illegitimate," Zurbishvili told a press conference on Friday.

Opposition groups accuse Georgian Dream of rigging the parliamentary vote, democratic backsliding and moving Tbilisi closer to Russia—all at the expense of the Caucasus nation's constitutionally mandated bid to join the European Union.

## South Korea's Yoon Faces Second Impeachment Vote Over Martial Law Bid



SEOUL (Dispatches) - A defiant South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol faced a second impeachment vote on Saturday over his short-lived attempt to impose martial law, a move that shocked the country, split his party and imperilled his presidency half way through his term.

Yoon rescinded his Dec. 3 move to impose military rule barely six hours later, after the opposition-controlled parliament defied troops and police to vote against the decree. But it plunged the country into a constitutional crisis and triggered widespread calls for him to step down on the grounds that he had broken the law.

Opposition parties planned to hold an impeachment vote at 4 p.m. (0700 GMT), with large demonstrations planned ahead of the vote.

Yoon's conservative People Power Party boycotted the first impeachment vote a week earlier, preventing a quorum.

Since then, PPP leader Han Dong-hoon has urged party members to vote for impeachment this time, and at least seven PPP members have said they would vote to impeach.

The opposition parties need at least eight PPP votes to impeach Yoon, as they control 192 of the 300 seats in the single-chamber parliament and impeachment requires a two-thirds majority.

Ahn Cheol-soo, a PPP lawmaker backing Yoon's impeachment, said in a Facebook post on Saturday that he would vote for impeachment "for the sake of swift stabilization of people's livelihood, economy and diplomacy".



## Mass Rallies Across Syria Celebrate End of Assad

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syrians rejoiced into the night as fireworks exploded on the first Friday – the Muslim day of rest and prayer – since the ouster of president Bashar al-Assad.

More than half a century of brutal rule by the Assad clan came to a sudden end on Sunday, after a lightning rebel offensive swept across the country and took the capital.

Assad's fall has also led to fast-moving diplomatic developments.

Turkey announced it reopened on Saturday its embassy, closed since 2012 amid Turkish government calls at that time for Assad to step down.

A Qatari diplomat said a delegation from the Persian Gulf emirate is to visit Syria on Sunday to meet officials of the transitional government and "take the necessary steps to reopen the embassy and discuss enhancing aid delivery".

Unlike other Arab states, Qatar never restored diplomatic ties with Assad after a rupture in 2011.

Assad fled Syria, closing an era in which suspected dissidents were jailed or killed, and capping nearly 14 years of war that killed more than 500,000 people and displaced millions.

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, head of the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which spearheaded the offensive, had called on Syrians "to go to the streets to express their joy".

They continued all afternoon and into the night, AFP live images showed from Umayyad Square in Damascus which was jammed with vehicles, people, and waving flags as fireworks shot into the air.

In the early days of Syria's uprising in 2011, pro-democracy protesters gave their Friday gatherings a different name every week.

On the first such day after Assad's fall they called it "Friday of victory".

Thousands flocked to the capital's landmark Umayyad Mosque, some raising the three-star Syrian independence flag which none dared wave in the capital during Assad's repressive rule.

Exhilarated crowds chanted, "The Syrian people is one!"

Crowds also gathered in the squares and streets of other Syrian cities, including Homs, Hama and Idlib.

There was a festive and relaxed atmosphere as hundreds rallied in the main square of Syria's second city Aleppo, a scene of fierce fighting during the country's civil war, AFP correspondents said.

A huge billboard depicting Assad and his father Hafez was set on fire.

"The Assad father and son oppressed us, but we have liberated our country from injustice," a white-bearded policeman at the scene said.

Ahmad Abd al-Majed, 39, an engineer who returned to Aleppo from Turkey, said many shed "tears of joy and happiness".

"Syrians deserve to be happy," he said.

In the southern city of Sweida, the heartland of Syria's Druze minority, Bayan al-Hinnawi, 77, never believed he would live to see such a day.

"It's a wonderful sight. Nobody could have imagined that this could happen", said Hinnawi, who spent 17 years in prison.

Sunni Muslim HTS is rooted in Syria's branch of Al-Qaeda and designated a terrorist organisation by many Western governments, which now face the challenge of how to approach the country's new leadership.

The group has sought to moderate its rhetoric, and the interim government insists the rights of all Syrians will be protected – as will the rule of law.

The European Union was seeking "to establish contacts" with the new rulers in the near future, an EU official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The United Nations refugee agency said the new government had sent "constructive" initial signals, including asking the organisation to stay in the country.

Leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) democratic countries, who met virtually on Friday, expressed hope for "a peaceful and orderly transition through the definition of an inclusive political process" in Syria.

Inside much of Syria, the focus is turning towards unravelling the secrets of Assad's rule, and particularly the network of detention centres and suspected torture sites.

Syrians have descended upon prisons, hospitals and morgues in search of long-disappeared loved ones.

"I turned the world upside down looking," Abu Mohammed told AFP as he searched for news of three missing relatives at the Mazzeh airbase in Damascus.

"We just want a hint of where they were."

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it has documented more than 35,000 cases of disappearances during Assad's rule, with the actual number likely far higher.

While Syrians celebrate the end of Assad's brutal government system, they face a struggle for basic necessities in a country ravaged by war, sanctions and runaway inflation.

On Friday, the EU announced the launch of an "air bridge" operation to deliver an initial 50 tonnes of health supplies via neighbouring Turkey.

Israel ready to stay in buffer zone

Assad was propped up by Russia – where a senior Russian official told US media he has fled – as well as Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told Turkey's private NTV television that his country had urged Russia and Iran not to intervene militarily against the rebel advance "to ensure minimum loss of life".

The rebels launched their offensive on November 27, the same day a ceasefire took effect in the Israel-Hezbollah war, which saw Israel inflict staggering losses on Assad's Lebanese ally.

Both Israel and Turkey, which backs some of the rebels who ousted Assad, have since carried out strikes inside Syria.

Israel has sent troops into a UN-patrolled buffer zone that separated Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights, in a move the UN said violated a 1974 armistice.

The army has been ordered to "prepare to remain" there throughout the winter, Defence Minister Israel Katz's office said on Friday.

In Baghdad on Friday as part of a Syria-focused tour, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that "as Syria transitions from the Assad dictatorship to hopefully a democracy", it should "not become in any way a platform for terrorism".

The United States has troops in both Syria and Iraq as part of a coalition against the Islamic State jihadist group.

## Macron's New PM Bayrou Faces Budget Battle With Fractious French Parliament



PARIS (Dispatches) - New French Prime Minister Francois Bayrou said he faced a "Himalaya" of a challenge to tackle France's deficit, with opponents' lukewarm reactions to his appointment underlining the difficulty of the job he faces.

President Emmanuel Macron earlier named Bayrou as his fourth prime minister of 2024, tasking his centrist ally with steering France out of its second political crisis in six months. He replaces Michel Barnier, who was ousted by lawmakers last week for trying to pass a cost-cutting 2025 budget.

Bayrou, a three-time presidential candidate who has long warned of French fiscal profligacy, inherits the same rowdy parliament that felled Barnier. His proximity to the deeply unpopular Macron may also hurt him.

In a speech alongside Barnier on Friday, Bayrou acknowledged the challenge.

"Nobody knows the difficulty of the situation better than I do... I am not unaware of the Himalaya that stands before us," he said. "I believe that this issue, the deficit and debt, is an issue that poses a moral problem, not just a financial one."

Efforts to rein in the deficit, expected to close the year at over 6% of gross domestic product, lie at the heart of France's political malaise.

The festering crisis has raised doubts about whether Macron will complete his second presidential term until 2027, lifted French borrowing costs and left a power vacuum in the heart of Europe, just as Donald Trump prepares to return to the White House.

Bayrou's immediate priority will be passing a special law to roll over the 2024

budget, with a nastier battle over the 2025 legislation looming early next year.

Bayrou told reporters he wanted to move quickly, but France's stark political divisions mean even the basic task of naming his cabinet could drag on.

The Socialists, irked that the president ignored their demands for a leftist prime minister in favour of a "Macronista", said they would not join Bayrou's coalition, and could even seek to topple him if he tries to ram through the budget.

The pro-Barnier centre-right said it would wait to see Bayrou's proposals before deciding whether to join him, Laurent Wauquiez, the head of the Republican Right grouping in the National Assembly, wrote on X.

Far-left France Unbowed party leaders said they would be immediately seeking to remove Bayrou, while far-right National Rally (RN) party chiefs said they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt for the time being.

Bayrou, the founder of the Democratic Movement (MoDem) party which has been a part of Macron's ruling alliance since 2017, has been the longtime mayor of the southwestern town of Pau. His rustic roots are a key component of his political character.

## Ukraine Battles Massive Russian Missile Strikes

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine said that it was fending off a new missile attack on its energy system, the latest in Russia's campaign targeting the war-torn country's power grid during the winter season.

Russia has escalated its strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, plunging hundreds of thousands into temporary blackouts as temperatures hit -5 degrees Celsius.

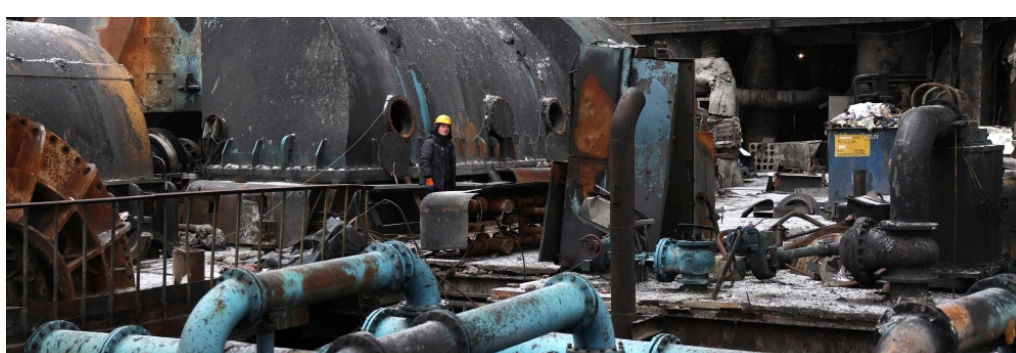
To fend off the strikes, Ukraine has been pleading for more air defence from its Western allies, amid fears support will soon be reduced when US president-elect Donald Trump takes office.

"The enemy continues its terror. Once again, the energy sector across Ukraine is under massive attack," Energy Minister German Galushchenko said.

"Engineers are taking all the necessary measures to minimise the consequences," he said after explosions were reported in a few regions.

The air raid alert was announced at 7am (0500 GMT), with social media channels that monitor threats reporting cruise and hypersonic Kinzhal missiles over several regions of Ukraine.

Ukraine's neighbour Poland said it placed its army on "high readiness" due to the threat of an attack.



Russia has conducted at least 11 large-scale strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure since the beginning of the year, Kyiv says.

To manage the power deficit, Ukraine's energy operator has been implementing hour-long outages, and it announced increased restrictions on Friday.

Moscow has previously acknowledged striking Ukraine's energy sites but says they are

legitimate targets as they "support the Ukrainian defence industry enterprises".

The latest strike comes a day after the Kremlin said it would "definitely" respond to a Ukrainian attack on a southern airfield using US-supplied ATACMS missiles.

President-elect Donald Trump said in an interview published yesterday that he disagreed "very vehemently" with Ukraine firing American-supplied missiles deep into Russia.

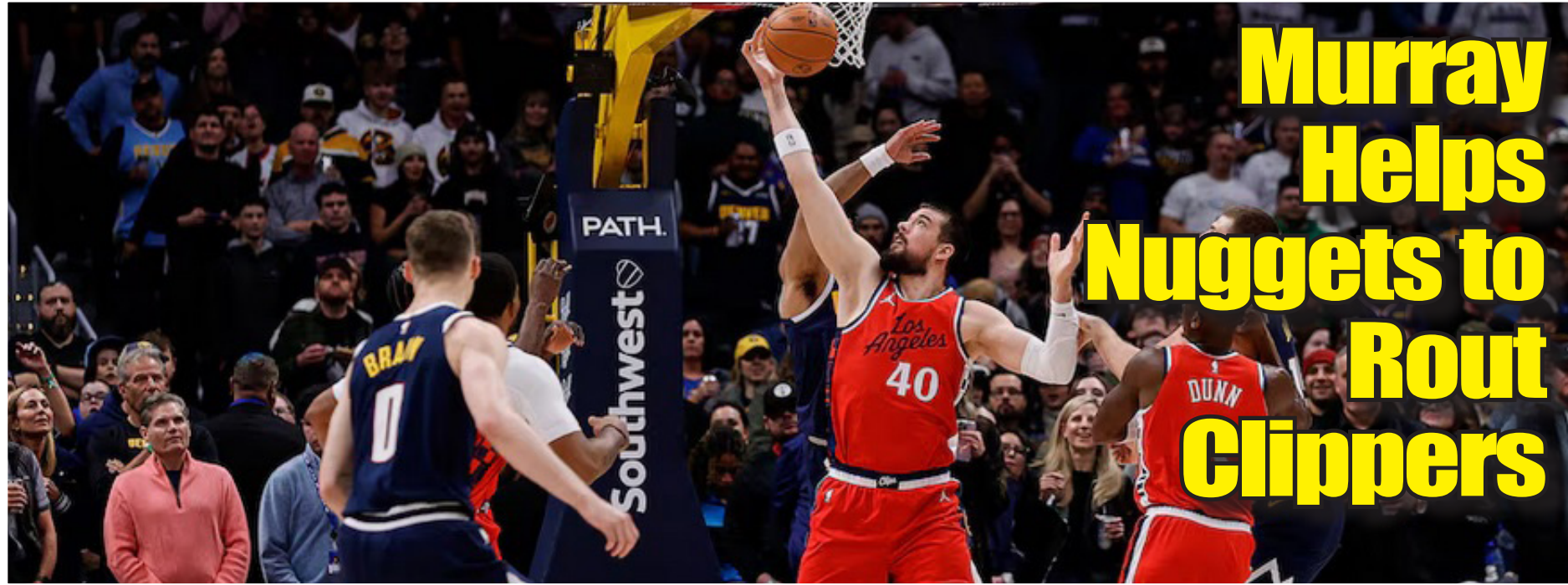
But Trump insisted he would not abandon Ukraine as US support for Kyiv would be key leverage in efforts to bring the war to a close.

Trump has boasted he would end the war swiftly, raising fears he might force Ukraine into a deal on Russia's terms.

Ukrainian officials urged allies to send more air defense to fend off the strikes on energy infrastructure.

Kyiv has repeatedly denounced the attacks on its energy system as attempts to break the population's morale.

"Russia aims to deprive us of energy. Instead, we must deprive it of the means of terror," Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga said on social media.



## Murray Helps Nuggets to Rout Clippers

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jamal Murray scored 20 points in his return from a hamstring injury and Michael Porter Jr. added 17 as the Denver Nuggets won consecutive games for the first time in a month with a 120-98 victory over the visiting Los Angeles Clippers.

Nikola Jokic scored 16 points, while Aaron Gordon and Peyton Watson added 14 each, as the Nuggets won for the first time in three tries against the Clippers. After he scored a combined 104 points in the previous two games without Murray, Jokic let others carry the load as he tied his lowest scoring output of the season.

It was the second of three games between the teams at Denver this season in a contest that was added to the schedule after NBA Cup group play was completed.

Kevin Porter Jr. and Norman Powell each scored 16 points as the Clippers lost their season-high-tying third consecutive game.

James Harden scored 15 points and Ivica Zubac added 13 points with 13 rebounds for Los Angeles, who welcomed Kawhi Leonard (knee) back to practice this week but the star still is not ready to make his season debut.

The Clippers built a 55-50 lead early in the second half before the Nuggets moved back in front 59-58 less than five minutes into the third quarter. Denver took charge from there while going on a 14-2 run to take a 73-60 lead.

The Nuggets took an 83-69 lead into the final quarter, getting 12 points from Michael Porter in the third period, while the team shot 57.9 percent from the floor.

The Nuggets took their first 20-point lead at 98-78 with 7:44 remaining after two free throws from Watson and cruised to the victory from there.

After a slow start, the Clippers posted an 18-0 run in the second quarter to take a 44-38 lead. The Nuggets surged back in front to lead 48-47 at halftime behind nine points and five rebounds from both Jokic and Gordon.

In his third game this season against his former team, Denver's Russell Westbrook had five points and five assists in 24 minutes off the bench.

Meanwhile Ja Morant had 28 points, 10 assists and seven rebounds as the Memphis Grizzlies won their fourth straight game, beating the visiting Brooklyn Nets 135-119.

Desmond Bane added 21 points and eight assists Santi Aldama made five 3-pointers and had 20 points off the bench for the Grizzlies, who won for the 10th time in their past 11 games. Jaren Jackson, Jr. put up 20 points, Brandon Clarke scored 14, and Jaylen Wells had 12.

Memphis never trailed after moving ahead 21-18 midway through the first quarter. The Grizzlies avenged two early-season losses to Brooklyn by shooting 52.5 percent from the field and 17 of 36 (47.2 percent) from 3-point range.

Jackson added seven rebounds and five steals for the Grizzlies, who have scored at least 115 points in 11 straight games.

Dorian Finney-Smith led Brooklyn with 19 points. Dennis Schroder and Jalen Wilson scored 15 points apiece, and Noah Clowney, Shake Milton, Day'Ron Sharpe, Cameron Johnson and Keon Johnson each had 12 points.

Brooklyn committed 18 turnovers and lost for the fifth time in its past six games.

The Grizzlies entered the contest as the league's highest-scoring team at 122.1 points per game and led 39-36 at the end of a fast-paced first quarter. The teams combined for 13 made 3-pointers in the opening period.

Morant scored 16 points in the second quarter to help the Grizzlies extend their lead to 69-56 at the half. After Brooklyn pulled within 74-72 on back-to-back 3-pointers by Johnson, Finney-Smith and Schroder early in the third quarter, Memphis answered with a 13-0 run capped by a 3-pointer from Jaylen Wells.

Memphis held a 107-95 advantage at the start of the fourth quarter and scored seven straight points to lead 121-106 with 7:34 remaining after a layup by Clarke.

Ben Simmons scored with 5:38 left to cut the Nets' deficit to 123-113, but the Grizzlies turned away the comeback effort by scoring the game's next 10 points.

Both teams were playing on four days' rest after failing to qualify for the final rounds of the NBA Cup.

## Verstappen Collects His F1 Trophy in Rwanda



KIGALI (Dispatches) - Rwandan President Paul Kagame joined Max Verstappen on stage when the Red Bull driver collected the Formula One champion's trophy for the fourth year in a row at an awards ceremony held in Africa for the first time on Friday.

The 27-year-old was handed the trophy by International Automobile Federation (FIA) president Mohammed Ben Sulayem alongside Kagame, who had earlier spoken of Rwanda bidding to host a race, at the gala in Kigali.

Verstappen, who is one of only six drivers to have won four or more titles since the championship started in 1950, said he was proud of his season and everyone in the team.

"It's amazing, four titles is definitely incredible. Of course I also hope it doesn't stop here. I hope we can be successful for a longer period of time," said Verstappen.

"This year the competition is very close, but then again in 2026 a lot is going to change."

McLaren won the constructors' title for the first time in 26 years, ending Red Bull's reign.

"Of course we're not standing here as constructors' champions. In a way, I do think we deserved a little bit more in that championship. I tried my very best and we also know a lot where we have to work on for next year," added Verstappen.

"I'm very excited about that as well because it does look like it's going to be a proper fight between a lot of teams."

The Dutch driver earlier attended a motorsports grassroots development programme with young people as an obligatory "work of public interest" as punishment for swearing at the Singapore Grand Prix in October.

## Kane to Remain England Captain



LONDON (Dispatches) - Harry Kane will remain England captain when Thomas Tuchel takes charge in January, the German said on Friday, signalling that all the players can count on a clean slate when the 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign starts under his management.

England were pitted against Serbia, Albania, Latvia and Andorra in Group K during the draw in Zurich, which was Tuchel's first engagement as England boss.

He was announced as head coach in October but will begin work on Jan. 1 ahead of the World Cup qualifying competition.

"There is at the moment no need to think about change," Tuchel told the reporters. "Harry was always a top captain for England. So why do you even think about it at the moment?"

"You cross the river when you cross the river. First, come January, we will be in touch with everyone and get the feeling for St George's Park and also the players.

"And until March, there's still a lot of football to be played and then we will try to find the best group for the games that await."

Tuchel, 51, suggested he would act independently of former manager Gareth Southgate's choices, building a team of his own with all players able to count on a clean slate.

One of the players who can expect a chat is Arsenal defender Ben White, who did not want to be considered for selection after surprisingly leaving the squad during the 2022 World Cup for personal reasons.

"I will reach out to him," Tuchel said. "It should be a clean start and a clear narrative."

White, who so far only made four friendly appearances for England, was rumoured to have personal issues with Southgate and his assistant Steve Holland, which the former manager later denied.

"It starts from January. I will be in the stadiums from January. I will also not distract the players and they should just know, 'okay, the boss is there from January,'" Tuchel added.

"Then I will of course try to speak to them but also be respectful to the schedule that they have, because the schedule is busy in January, especially in the Premier League."

England were placed in a five-team group, meaning qualifiers will begin in late March and continue in June, as opposed to a September start for groups of four.

That signifies a fast start for Tuchel, who will embark on his England journey less than three months before the qualifying begins and make his managerial debut for the Three Lions just 15 months ahead of the 2026 tournament.

# Man City Announce Record Premier League Revenue Last Season

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City posted record revenues for a Premier League club last season as the champions' income increased to £715 million.

As City marched to an unprecedented fourth successive Premier League title last term, their revenue rose from £712.8million to the new record mark for the year to June 30.

However, profits dipped from £80.4 million in City's treble-winning 2022-23 campaign to £73.8 million last season.

They experienced a drop in broadcast income due to Pep Guardiola's side failing to repeat their run to win a first Champions League crown in 2023.

City's current investments include a £300 million expansion of the north stand of the Etihad Stadium.

Chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak said in the club's annual report: "Our constant ambition to target and achieve the unprecedented is a



mark of the organisation that we have become. "On and off the field, our passion for the next challenge is underpinned by deliberate and detailed planning and a shared belief in the collaborative learning culture that we have built.

"Our focus remains on further evolution and growth and therefore further value creation in all aspects of our business."

Beaten by Juventus in the Champions League on Wednesday, City face Manchester United in the Premier League on Sunday as they try to halt a damaging run of one win in 10 games in all competitions.

They are in danger of failing to make the Champions League last 16 and sit eight points behind Premier League leaders Liverpool after their shocking slump.

City are awaiting a decision on the 115 charges of alleged breaches of financial rules brought against them by the Premier League.

The club, who have strongly denied the charges, could face a points deduction or even relegation from the top-flight if they are found guilty.

## Vonn to Return to World Cup Racing

LONDON (Reuters) - Lindsey Vonn will make her return to the World Cup circuit for the first time in nearly six years in two super Gs in St. Moritz, Switzerland on Dec. 21-22, the Olympic gold medalist said on Friday.

The 40-year-old speed specialist retired in February 2019 citing the physical toll the sport had taken on her body but, following partial knee replacement surgery in April, she announced she was making a comeback last month.

Vonn returned to competition with four races in Copper Mountain, Colorado last weekend, which led her to decide to compete at St. Moritz.

"What changed was that I was put back together again," Vonn told a press conference.

"I had been struggling with injuries since my first ACL in 2013 and I've pretty much been injured every year after that. The last few years of my career were more challenging than I let on," she said.

"But I feel stronger now than I did in my late 20s. The passion for skiing has never gone away, I just wasn't physically able to do it anymore.

"So now that I have the chance to physically do what I love, why would I not try? Life is short. You've got to live every day to the maximum and that's all I'm doing."



She said her entire outlook changed after having bone in her knee replaced with titanium, which allowed her to straighten her right leg completely for the first time in years.

"It was pretty soon after surgery and in the rehab process that I was already doing things that I hadn't done in years," she said.

"My body was just functioning better. Obviously I am a lot happier because I'm not in pain 24 hours a day.

"I'm getting stronger and better and faster than I was for a long, long period of time."

The four-time overall World Cup champion, who has 82 World Cup wins to her name and three Olympic medals including one gold, said she has goals beyond just taking part in races.

"While I am very excited to be participating, I definitely have goals and expectations," she added. "I'm trying to be as patient with myself as possible on this journey. Take it step by step, not skip any steps.

"I know my way back to a competitive level might take a race or two but I certainly intend to get back to where I was before."