

# IRAN NEWS

The Spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry Has Rejected as “Baseless, Unrealistic, and Irrelevant” the Recent Claims Made by the UK and Australia on the Islamic Republic

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Said That the Advisory Presence of the Islamic Republic in Syria Was Aimed at Supporting the Syrian Army, Combating Terrorism, and Preventing Insecurity From Spreading to the Broader Region.

VOL. XXIX, No. 8161 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SUNDAY DECEMBER 22, 2024 DEY 02, 1403

## 2 DOMESTIC

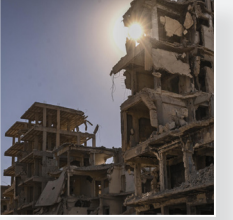


### Majlis Speaker Urges Practical Legislation

> SEE PAGE 2

## 3 INTERNATIONAL

### U.S. Scraps Terrorist Bounty for Syria's HTS Leader After First Official Talks



> SEE PAGE 3

### Iran Doesn't Regret Spending in Syria



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Akbar Ahmadian says Iran does not regret spending on the fight against the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in Syria, as its expenditure achieved the goal of ensuring the Islamic Republic's security.

He made the remarks in an interview with Khamenei.ir, the official website of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, on Thursday, days after foreign-backed militants announced the fall of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, where Iranian military advisors were present.

He was asked about propaganda launched by anti-Iran media over Tehran's military advisory role in Syria over the past years.

"We do not regret the cost we incurred... because our presence and expenditure were for our own security and we achieved what we expected," he said.

"If Daesh had not been eliminated in Syria and Iraq, today we would have to fight it at home at a cost ten times more."

Ahmadian also noted that the elimination of Daesh completely thwarted the United States' plots and rendered their multi-year investment fruitless.

The Americans built an army or a government against the Islamic Revolution, but Iran disrupted their plan, and this achievement is enough to pay for the country's presence in Syria, he emphasized.

In 2014, Daesh captured large swathes of land in Iraq and Syria in lightning attacks, declaring the areas it controlled as "caliphate."

However, Iraqi and Syrian forces, with the help of Iran, managed to reverse Daesh's gains and ultimately liberate their countries from the US-sponsored terror outfit some three years later.

On December 8, the militants, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), announced the fall of Assad's government following a rapid two-week onslaught.

Elsewhere in his interview, the top security official said Iran eventually managed to strengthen and equip Palestine and Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance group and make them self-reliant.

"Today, Hezbollah is a completely independent and self-reliant group. In Gaza, for example, they (resistance fighters) are producing rockets and missiles for themselves inside tunnels," he added.

Ahmadian further highlighted the power of Hezbollah, along with that of Yemen's Ansarullah and the Palestinian resistance groups of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

"No one can eliminate Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Ansarullah. They have become part of the people, who are equipped and mature while having the knowledge and technology to manufacture the items needed to defend themselves," he said.



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi warns about a long-term underplay plot by the United States and the Israeli regime aimed at disintegration of regional Muslim countries as a means of enabling Tel Aviv to dominate the entire region.

The top diplomat made the remarks on Friday during an interview with the al-Ghad network in the Egyptian capital Cairo, where he earlier attended the 21st Session of the Council of Ministers of D-8 (Developing-8) Organization for Economic Cooperation.

He cited the regime's US-enabled war of genocide and escalated deadly aggression against the Gaza Strip and Lebanon as well as its ongoing intensified attacks against Syria's defensive and economic infrastructures as the proof of the Islamic Republic's repeated warnings about the threat posed by the regime to the whole region.

The official also noted that "Israel has repeatedly tried to drag the entire region into a wide-ranging war," adding that the Islamic Republic had, however, acted "very intelligently" in the face of the regime's warlike provocations.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Araqchi pointed to Iran's years-long support for Syria during the tenure of the Arab country's former government, describing the support as a means of backing up not any certain individual, but the entire Arab nation, its national sovereignty, and territorial integrity in the face of the Israeli regime and the scourge of terrorism.

As part of the support, the Islamic Republic would provide Damascus with some pieces of advice concerning the manner of the latter's interaction with the Syrian people and political opposition, he noted.

"The Syrian government, however, would act on its own initiative, and was not being controlled by Iran and Russia."

Araqchi cited the case of the Islamic Republic's advisory support, led by the country's former

top anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani, for the Syrian military in the face of the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group and other terror outfits.

The official, meanwhile, cautioned about potential return of the threat of terrorism to Syria due to the unraveled state of the Arab country's affairs, saying the threat was posed to all regional countries.

He also dismissed allegations of exertion of any control on the part of the Islamic Republic on resistance groups across the region, noting that the country and the movements were common in their objective of fighting the Israeli regime and supporting the people of Palestine, but each of the movements acted independently.

Araqchi hailed the groups for their delivering "heavy blows" to the regime, despite its assassination of some of their leaders, saying it was these blows that forced the regime into accepting a ceasefire in Lebanon last month.

The official described the resistance as a "lofty cause and sacred ideology in the face of the Zionist regime's occupation and atrocities," saying the martyrdom of resistance leaders would not weaken the movements, which restore their capabilities more strongly that before every time.

He also discussed the potential of creation of an Arab-Islamic coalition in the region, besides commending Iran and Egypt's civilizational and historical stance, and their important and effective regional position.

Araqchi considered reinforcement of cooperation and coordination between the countries to be in line with the interests of all regional countries and the whole Muslim world, noting that Tehran had always backed Cairo's efforts in support of the Palestinian people and cessation of the Israeli regime's atrocities against them.

### Government Committed to Tackling Fuel Mafia



TEHRAN - The First Vice President of Iran emphasized that the government's primary focus is to address key challenges without burdening public sentiment. He described the current administration's approach as one of "silent problem-solving."

Mohammad Reza Aref, during a meeting on Saturday, December 21, 2024, with members of the presidium of the Iranian Reform Front, stated that the nation's survival depends on embracing reformist discourse. He urged government officials to uphold the principles of national unity and consensus.

Highlighting the President's decisive leadership, Aref noted, "When the President identifies a course of action that benefits the country, he stands firm, as demonstrated in recent days."

Aref pointed to significant challenges such as the electricity crisis and underscored the importance of transitioning to renewable energy, particularly solar power. The administration has devised plans to harness renewable resources to address these issues effectively.

He also expressed concerns about water shortages, urging experts, academics, and professionals to collaborate with the government to find sustainable solutions.

Reflecting on his bilateral meetings with Qatar's Emir and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Aref described the discussions as productive and highlighted the administration's efforts to strengthen foreign relations, especially with neighboring and regional countries. "The 14th administration has fostered a conducive environment for regional cooperation," he said.

Addressing the issue of fuel smuggling, Aref stated, "The government is rigorously pursuing measures to prevent smuggling and combat the fuel mafia. These efforts are crucial for the country's stability."

He also called for reforms in recruitment processes to ensure merit-based employment while maintaining respect for managers and preventing the exclusion of talented individuals.

### Tehran Calls on Paris to Probe Killing of Two Iranians in Northern France Shooting



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Foreign Ministry has called on the French government to thoroughly investigate the "suspicious" killing of two Iranians in an armed shooting in northern France.

According to Le Monde, five people were killed in northern France on December 14, including two Iranian men, aged 19 and 30. It quoted local police and the prefecture as saying that the men were living in a local camp for migrants.

A 22-year-old suspect surrendered to authorities and was taken into custody on the same day with authorities saying he had no criminal record.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular, Parliamentary, and Expatriate Affairs Vahid Jalalzadeh on Friday expressed condolences to the families and loved ones of the two Iranian nationals who were killed in a "suspicious armed attack for racist motives".

He called on relevant security and judiciary officials of France to investigate the case and give accurate information in this regard.

Immediately after the incident, the Iranian embassy in Paris contacted the French authorities to follow up on the matter and demanded the identification, prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators of the crime, he said.

Jalalzadeh added that Iran's Foreign Ministry, in contact with the French embassy in Tehran, has emphasized the need for a thorough judicial investigation and prosecution of the perpetrator or perpetrators of this crime in order to ensure justice is served and blood money of the victims will be paid.

He affirmed the Iranian Foreign Ministry's seriousness in fulfilling its duties vis-a-vis the rights of the country's nationals living abroad.

The ministry would take necessary measures to facilitate the repatriation of the bodies of the two men to Iran and pursue the issue until all circumstances of the incident are clarified, the diplomat emphasized.

### Pakistan Navy/ PMSA Ships Visit to Port of Bandar Abbas



TEHRAN - A flotilla comprising 03 x Pakistan Navy/ Pakistan Maritime Security Ships are visiting port of Bandar Abbas, Iran from 21-24 December 2024 as a part of overseas deployment. Commodore Muhammad Umair SI (M), Commander 14th Destroyer Squadron from Pakistan Navy is the Mission Commander of the contingent. The Pakistani ships' visit to Iran is indicative of good relations between the two countries. The ships are bringing message of solidarity, peace and cooperation in the region. Such visits are considered vital in maintaining good relations in the region and promoting peace and security for all shipping. Commander of Surface Flotilla and officers of 1st Naval zone received Commodore Muhammad Umair SI (M) on the arrival of the Pakistan Navy Ships to IRI port of Bandar Abbas on 21st December 2024.

## President Says Science and Knowledge Should Serve the People

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian has underscored that science and knowledge should be pursued for the benefit of the people, not for material or worldly purposes, emphasizing that serving the public must remain a core priority.

Speaking at a ceremony honoring global scientific Olympiad medalists, President Pezeshkian stated, "This nation needs individuals who feel the pain of the people and dedicate their knowledge, skills, and efforts to solving societal problems." The event took place on Saturday, December 21, 2024.

The President congratulated the Olympiad champions, their families, and the educators who supported their success. Addressing the medalists, he remarked, "You stand at the beginning of global achievements. Strive to address the challenges facing your country. During times of war, we took to the battlefronts; during management crises, we stepped into leadership roles. The same spirit should inspire all endeavors—including ensuring that everyone has access to medical care, not just a privileged few."

Pezeshkian emphasized that young elites should embed a sense of duty to help the people within themselves. "With your knowledge and determination, we can build a greater Iran—far beyond where it stands today. The thought of abandoning the country or serving others should never cross your minds," he said.

He highlighted historical lessons, referencing the book 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe. He recounted a story where scientists, offered freedom and financial support abroad, chose to stay and rebuild their nation instead, declaring, "This country is ours, and we



must fix it."

The President urged the youth to cultivate teamwork and problem-solving skills. "It is the government's responsibility to create opportunities for you to work together effectively. Every challenge has multiple solutions, and with persistence, you will find them."

He advised the young talents to keep learning throughout their lives, saying, "To serve the people and the nation, you must never stop striving. Continuous learning and dedication will ensure lasting progress."

Responding to requests from the Olympiad participants for advisory roles in government, Pezeshkian cautioned against excessive involvement in time-consuming administrative tasks. "Your time is too valuable to be spent in prolonged meetings. Focus on scientific progress and your future endeavors."

Pezeshkian stressed the importance of uplifting Iran through the collective efforts of its youth. "This nation will only advance with the dedication of informed, motivated individuals. Opportunists and insincere people will not take us forward. It's your determination and wisdom that will shape tomorrow's Iran."

He concluded with a message of hope and responsibility: "We have placed our trust in you. With determination and effort, we can overcome any obstacle. Success doesn't come easily, just as your current achievements required hard work."

The event was attended by key officials, including Hossein Afshin, Deputy President for Science, Technology, and Knowledge-Based Economy, who also serves as the head of the National Elite Foundation.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran, Russia diplomats discuss Pezeshkian Visit to Moscow

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iranian Ambassador to Moscow and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Andrey Rudenko held a meeting to discuss the visit of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to Russia. Jalali and Rudenko held a meeting on Friday to discuss the cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in different areas including economy, politics, and consular issues. They also conferred on the visit of the Iranian president to the Russian Federation. During the meeting, the Iranian ambassador stressed the necessity of facilitating the advancement of joint agreements between the two states. The two sides also exchanged views on the latest arrangements related to the documents that are set to be signed.

## Gas Overconsumption in Iran: 3.3 Times the Global Average; Saving 50 Million Cubic Meters Possible



TEHRAN - The CEO of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) revealed that Iran's gas consumption is 3.3 times the global average, emphasizing that adopting efficient usage practices could save 50 million cubic meters of natural gas daily.

Speaking before Tehran's Friday prayers, Saeed Tavakoli extended greetings on the occasions of Yalda Night, the birth anniversary of Hazrat Fatemeh Zahra (PBUH), and Mother's Day. Tavakoli highlighted that while Iran holds the world's second-largest gas reserves, inefficiency in consumption has led to excessive usage.

Tavakoli noted that Iran's geological structure provides an abundance of natural gas, a resource formed over 250 million years. He underscored the importance of preserving this valuable asset through responsible consumption.

In comparing the state of the gas industry before and after the Islamic Revolution, Tavakoli pointed out a 40-fold expansion in facilities and infrastructure.

"Before the Revolution, the country had one local refinery, one major refinery, and a single nationwide pipeline," he said. This pipeline exclusively transported processed gas to Russia.

Today, the industry boasts 20 natural gas refineries, 40,000 kilometers of high-pressure pipelines, 94 compression stations, and 459,000 kilometers of urban gas networks, reflecting substantial growth. Tavakoli described the gas sector as one of the most revolutionary, people-oriented, and dynamic industries in Iran.

Tavakoli stated that 860 million cubic meters of gas are currently supplied to the country's network, with approximately 80% consumed by residential, commercial, and small industrial sectors.

He emphasized that the winter season poses a significant challenge due to plummeting temperatures. To manage consumption, the NIGC has encouraged industries to switch to liquid fuels.

The most effective strategy, according to Tavakoli, is adherence to consumption guidelines. Public institutions such as mosques, government offices, schools, and other facilities must maintain indoor temperatures within the comfort range of 18-22 degrees Celsius.

In households, minor adjustments—like wearing warmer clothing indoors—can significantly reduce consumption. Experts estimate that lowering home temperatures by just one degree Celsius can cut gas usage by 6%.



## Majlis Speaker Urges Practical Legislation

TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf has emphasized the importance of drafting enforceable laws, asserting that passing impractical legislation undermines governance and erodes trust. Speaking on Saturday at a ceremony honoring top researchers from the Parliament's Research Center, Qalibaf highlighted the critical role of research in shaping the nation's legislative and governance strategies.

He criticized the practice of approving laws that cannot be implemented effectively. "It is unacceptable for the Parliament to pass laws that lack practical applicability. This approach is neither logical nor beneficial," he stated. He stressed that lawmakers should adopt a pragmatic approach, ensuring that legislation aligns with the realities of governance and society's needs.

He further noted that "the first violator of impractical laws is the lawmaker themselves," urging Parliament to avoid this contradiction. "Such behavior creates the initial obstacle to rule of law in society," he added.

Describing the Parliament's Research Center as the "detached intellect" of the legislature, Qalibaf underscored its broader significance. "This center doesn't just belong to the Parliament but is a resource for the Islamic Revolution and the nation's governing system," he said. He called on the center to devise strategic frameworks that reflect on past, present, and future challenges, ensuring sustainable progress.

Qalibaf lauded the center's initiatives, such as the establishment of a governance school, innovation hubs, a student parliament, and public opinion polling units. He encouraged their expansion, emphasizing that such efforts contribute to informed decision-making and robust policy development.

He stressed the necessity of prioritizing foreign policy in legislative considerations. "Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly emphasized the importance of foreign policy, and the Parliament must heed this directive," he said. The Speaker also highlighted the need for a collaborative approach in lawmaking, advocating for "collective wisdom and crowd-sourcing" to create laws that resonate with society.

In his remarks, Qalibaf noted the critical role of young talent within the Research Center, urging them to blend theoretical knowledge with practical experience by engaging with seasoned experts. "We require both theoretical

and practical wisdom to succeed," he said.

The Speaker called for stronger collaboration between the Parliament's Research Center and the executive branch. He highlighted President Masoud Pezeshkian's emphasis on using comprehensive national plans as a framework for cooperation. "Our shared foundation is the macro policies of the system and the Seventh Development Plan," he said, referring to the country's long-term roadmap for economic and social progress.

Qalibaf praised the Research Center's contributions to the Seventh Development Plan, describing it as a collective effort that reflects past realities. However, he acknowledged existing debates, such as whether the plan's target of 8% economic growth is achievable. "With proper investment and productivity improvements, at least 4% of this target is attainable," he argued.

The Seventh Development Plan, according to Qalibaf, serves as a "national covenant" requiring collective commitment. He cited public cooperation in energy conservation as an example of citizens' willingness to support national initiatives when approached effectively.

He emphasized the importance of engaging the public in policymaking, noting that laws must be rooted in both societal acceptance and Islamic principles. "The foundation of legislation must stem from Sharia, and we continue to pursue this objective," he said.

In closing, Qalibaf reiterated the need for evidence-based policymaking grounded in robust research. He urged the Research Center to prioritize logical reasoning, high academic standards, and humility in its work, asserting that these qualities would enhance the center's credibility and contribute to its researchers' professional and personal fulfillment.

Looking ahead, he announced plans for field visits to the Research Center, aiming to strengthen ties and oversee its activities firsthand. "By embedding research within the heart of society, we can ensure that our laws and priorities address real needs and achieve meaningful impact," he concluded.

The Speaker's remarks reflect a broader commitment to enhancing Iran's legislative processes, ensuring they are informed by rigorous research and aligned with practical realities. By fostering collaboration between institutions and engaging the public, Iran's Parliament aims to build a governance framework that is both effective and inclusive.

## Road Transport Plays a Vital Role in National Policy Implementation



TEHRAN - In a message celebrating Road Keeper Day, Farzaneh Sadegh, Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, highlighted the crucial role road keepers play in ensuring the safety, comfort, and tranquility of road travel across the country. The message, addressed to the road maintenance workforce, emphasized their dedication and resilience in the face of challenging conditions.

The minister's statement reads: "To the guardians of road safety and comfort—the dedicated road keepers of our nation, along with your patient families who support you tirelessly—I sincerely congratulate you on Road Keeper Day. This occasion, marking the start of winter, honors your unwavering commitment and selfless efforts in maintaining our country's roads.

This day is an opportunity to raise public awareness about the value, necessity, and challenges of your invaluable services. Your sacrifices in battling winter storms, scorching summer days, and year-round hardships exemplify a rare dedication, often unnoticed by the broader community.

Undoubtedly, road transport holds a pivotal position in advancing the nation's overarching policies and leveraging its geopolitical and transit advantages. Consequently, the development of infrastructure, transport networks, and supportive facilities within this sector remains a top priority for the current administration."

The minister also emphasized the critical mission of road keepers in maintaining smooth and safe road travel for both passengers and goods across Iran's expansive network of roads. This network includes over 3,050 kilometers of freeways, 48,700 kilometers of highways, 37,000 kilometers of secondary roads, and approximately 133,000 kilometers of rural roads. Supported by more than 1,050 active road maintenance centers and 9,600 operational machinery units, the road keepers' work ensures uninterrupted transportation across the country.

The minister concluded with wishes for the health and success of all road keepers and their families, acknowledging their sacrifices and contributions to the nation's progress. She also expressed hope for the implementation of measures to address workplace challenges and improve the well-being of these vital workers.

"May you always remain healthy, successful, and proud in your service to our nation," she added.

## 5% Share of Knowledge-Based Products in National Exports



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Trade Development Organization announced that in 2023, knowledge-based companies accounted for 2.6% of the total export weight and 5% of the export value.

According to the public relations department of the Iran Trade Development Organization, citing the Vice Presidency for Science and Technology, Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi emphasized the importance of non-oil exports, particularly those grounded in a knowledge-based economy, for enhancing the country's economic security and development.

Dehnavi highlighted that reliance on oil, raw materials, and semi-processed goods for exports has been a critical weakness, especially during sanctions and international restrictions.

He further stated that economic studies reveal a significant correlation between economic growth and the advancement of knowledge-based economies. Such exports are less vulnerable to external limitations, as they are built on human expertise and production capacity rather than dependence on natural resources.

Based on customs data from the Islamic Republic of Iran, knowledge-based companies contributed 2.6% of the export weight and 5% of the total export value in 2023. Advanced materials and products derived from chemical technologies accounted for approximately 80% of the export value in this sector.

Dehnavi added that while the current share is modest, knowledge-based companies are undoubtedly key players in Iran's economy. Strengthening exports from this sector is a top priority for the Trade Development Organization.

He also stressed the need to boost Iran's position in innovation and technology across various domains. Enhancing international trade cooperation and showcasing the potential of Iranian companies, particularly in the knowledge-based sector, requires organizing more events to facilitate interaction among key stakeholders in this ecosystem.

## Uncertainty in the Economy Hinders Full Benefits of Free Trade With Eurasia

TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Kazakhstan Joint Chamber of Commerce has stated that as long as the current governance and economic policies remain in place—policies heavily influenced by external factors beyond the control of the government and private sector—Iran cannot fully benefit from the lucrative advantages of its free trade agreement with Eurasia.

Amiri Abedi highlighted the need to eliminate economic uncertainties and imbalances that have plagued the country. He noted that as long as the current exchange rate policies persist, the agreement's potential advantages will remain out of reach.

Abedi pointed out a significant gap between Iran's inflation rate and those of Eurasian member states. Unlike Iran, most of these countries—except for Russia and Belarus—are not under sanctions, are members of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and do not suffer from similar economic imbalances. Additionally, their per capita incomes far exceed that of Iran.

"Iranian producers, given the volatile exchange rates, cannot even plan for the next week, let alone establish stability in pricing," Abedi said. This instability, he argued, hinders competitive production and erodes the potential for economic gains.

Abedi stressed that Iran's policies must shift toward stability and provide a clearer economic outlook to benefit both citizens and businesses. Without such changes, Iran's declining production capacity will continue to suffer under economic imbalances, leaving producers entangled in challenges beyond their control.

He further explained that Eurasian countries export only a handful of goods to Iran, limiting the possibility of Iran becoming a significant importer from the region. On the export side, however, Iran has the



potential to supply a diverse range of products, particularly in agriculture and food industries.

"Even under current circumstances, the free trade agreement poses no threat to domestic production. Most imports from Eurasia consist of agricultural inputs and livestock feed," Abedi noted.

The agreement, Abedi emphasized, offers particular advantages for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Eurasian countries are

active in agricultural and food industry supply chains, and the agreement could be especially beneficial for Iranian SMEs operating in these sectors.

However, he warned that Iran's production capacity, already operating at only 35% before the current economic imbalances, has likely declined further due to energy shortages. Addressing these issues, he argued, would require policy reforms to increase per capita income, stabilize employment, and enhance production capacity.

Reflecting on past agreements, Abedi criticized the lack of operational success in prior regional and international trade pacts, attributing their failure to the absence of private sector involvement and a predominance of political considerations.

In contrast, the Eurasian free trade agreement was negotiated professionally, with the participation of the Iran Chamber of Commerce. "This agreement could yield significant benefits if implemented effectively," he said.

Abedi highlighted key benefits of the agreement, such as tariff elimination and improved banking and financial mechanisms. However, he acknowledged that Iran's flawed economic structures and unresolved issues with FATF and sanctions continue to block the agreement's full potential.

## President Strategically Addresses Trade and Regional Issues at D-8 Summit



TEHRAN - Iran's President has effectively focused on trade and regional issues during the recent D-8 Summit, according to Hojjat al-Islam Alireza Salimi, head of the Iran-Egypt Parliamentary Friendship Group. Salimi highlighted the significant economic opportunities presented by the summit and its member nations.

Salimi discussed the President's visit to Egypt to attend the D-8 summit, which included bilateral and multilateral discussions. "The summit, addressing regional matters alongside economic cooperation, has a substantial impact on enhancing economic frameworks among member states," he stated.

Salimi emphasized the strategic value of the D-8 group in improving economic mechanisms, adding that the President's engagements on the sidelines of the summit with his counterparts and delegates could bolster bilateral relations and foster stronger political and economic ties.

"The utilization of the D-8's capacities will significantly advance Iran's trade sector," Salimi remarked. He noted the unique regional dynamics, including recent developments in Syria, as pivotal topics of discussion that could benefit both Iran and other member states. He praised the delegation for its precise focus on these issues.

The MP also acknowledged the participation of nations involved in the Syrian conflict and highlighted Iran's diplomatic efforts during the summit. The Iranian Foreign Minister held talks with counterparts on Syria, Gaza, and Israeli aggression, aiming to promote unity among members regarding these critical concerns.

## U.S. House Passes Funding Bill to Avert Gov't Shutdown

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. House of Representatives voted Friday to avert a government shutdown with just hours to spare, with Democrats joining Republicans to advance a funding bill keeping the lights on through mid-March. Lawmakers sent a package to the Senate that would keep federal agencies running through mid-March - but the upper chamber only had until midnight (0500 GMT) to follow suit or federal agencies will begin shutting. Although the House is run by the Republicans, who introduced the bill, 34 of the party's backbenchers voted against it, while almost every Democrat was a yes.

"Today, Democrats stood firm in our commitment to collaboration, not division. The American people deserve a government that works for them," senior Democratic Congressman Bennie Thompson posted on X.



# IRAN NEWS

## Trump Threatens EU With Tariffs Over Oil and Gas Imports



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President-elect Donald Trump said on Friday the European Union should step up U.S. oil and gas imports or face tariffs on the bloc's exports that include goods such as cars and machinery.

The EU already buys the lion's share of U.S. oil and gas exports, according to U.S. government data.

No extra volumes are currently available as the United States is exporting at capacity, but Trump has pledged to further grow the country's oil and gas production.

"I told the European Union that they must make up their tremendous deficit with the United States by the large-scale purchase of our oil and gas," Trump said in a post on Truth Social.

"Otherwise, it is TARIFFS all the way!!!" he added.

The European Commission said it was ready to discuss with Trump how to strengthen what it described as an already strong relationship, including in the energy sector.

"The EU is committed to phasing out energy imports from Russia and diversifying our sources of supply," a spokesperson said.

The United States already supplied 47% of the European Union's liquefied natural gas imports and 17% of its oil imports in the first quarter of 2024, according to data from EU statistics office Eurostat.

Trump, who takes office on Jan. 20, has vowed to impose tariffs of 10% on global imports into the U.S. along with a 60% tariff on Chinese goods - duties that trade experts say would upend trade flows, raise costs and draw retaliation against U.S. exports.

The U.S. ran a \$208.7-billion goods trade deficit with the EU in 2023, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Although the U.S. runs a surplus with the EU on services, Trump has focused mainly on goods trade, frequently complaining about the bloc's car exports to the U.S. with few vehicles shipped east across the Atlantic.

## U.S. Scraps Terrorist Bounty for Syria's HTS Leader After First Official Talks



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - A senior U.S. diplomat told Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa on Friday that Washington was scrapping a reward for his arrest as she welcomed "positive messages" from their talks, including a promise to fight terrorism.

Barbara Leaf, part of the first formal visit by U.S. diplomats to Damascus since the early days of the brutal civil war, said she told Sharaa of the "critical need to ensure terrorist groups cannot pose a threat inside of Syria or externally, including to the US and our partners in the region."

"Ahmed al-Sharaa committed to this," Leaf told reporters after the meeting in Damascus.

"Based on our discussion, I told him we would not be pursuing the Rewards for Justice reward offer," she said.

Sharaa and his rebels, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, remain on Washington's terror blacklist. Leaf did not comment on the designation but said that after her discussions with Sharaa, "it's a little incoherent, then, to have a bounty on the guy's head."

Sharaa has spoken of inclusion and disbanding rebel factions. Leaf said she reinforced "the importance of inclusion and broad consultation during this time of transition."

"We fully support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process that results in an inclusive and representative government which respects the rights of all Syrians, including women, and Syria's diverse ethnic and religious communities."

Assad, a largely secular leader from the Alawite minority, was the main Arab ally of Iran's Shiite cleric-run state, which has faced a slew of setbacks at the hands of Israel.

Asked about Iran's future role in Syria, Leaf said, "If I'm to judge by today, Iran will have no role whatsoever -- and it shouldn't, frankly."

Iran, with its deployment of Revolutionary Guards and Lebanese militia Hezbollah, "really preyed upon and really viciously brutalized the Syrian people," she said.

US diplomats have not been to Damascus on a formal mission since the early days of the civil war that erupted after Assad cracked down on anti-government protests in 2011.

The delegation would also meet with activists, minority groups and civil society representatives, the State Department said. The group includes Barbara Leaf, the top State Department official for the Middle East, as well as the US point man on hostages, who has been seeking clues on missing Americans including Austin Tice, a journalist who was kidnapped in Syria in August 2012.

Their visit follows a statement by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, revealing direct contact with HTS.

At talks in Aqaba, Jordan, Western, Arab and Turkish powers jointly called for an "inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government" that respects the rights of all of Syria's diverse communities.

This was echoed in Cairo by Turkey and Iran, which supported different sides in the war.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who backed Assad's opponents, stressed reconciliation and restoration of Syria's territorial integrity and unity.

Turkey has been putting pressure on Kurdish-led forces in Syria, and Erdogan said Friday it was time to destroy "terrorist" groups operating in the country, namely Islamic State group jihadists and Kurdish fighters.

"Daesh, the PKK and their affiliates -- which threaten the survival of Syria -- must be eradicated," he told journalists following the Cairo summit, referring to IS and the Kurdistan Workers Party, respectively.

The semi-autonomous northeastern region of Syria is protected by the Syrian Democratic Forces, a group led by People's Protection Units (YPG).

Turkey accuses the YPG of being a branch of the PKK, which both Washington and Ankara consider a terrorist group.

## Macron Swears in Angry Exchange With Residents of Cyclone-Hit Mayotte



MAMOUZOU (Dispatches) - Angry residents of a Mayotte neighbourhood damaged by Cyclone Chido heckled French President Emmanuel Macron, who replied they would be in "deeper shit" without France as he toured the Indian Ocean archipelago.

Nearly a week after the storm hit, the lack of potable water was testing nerves in France's poorest overseas territory.

"Seven days and you're not able to give water to the population!" one man shouted at Macron.

"Don't set people against each other. If you set people against each other, we're screwed," Macron told the crowd in the Pamandzi neighbourhood on Thursday night.

"You are happy to be in France. If it wasn't for France, you would be in way deeper shit, 10,000 times more, there is no place in the Indian Ocean where people receive more help."

In the past, Macron has often got in trouble with off-the-cuff remarks in public that he says are meant to "tell it like it is" but have often come across as insensitive or condescending to many French people and contributed to his sharp drop in popularity over his seven years as president.

Back home, opposition lawmakers pounced on the comments on Friday.

## Driver Kills at Least Two After Ramming Into Crowd at German Christmas Market

BERLIN (Dispatches) - A driver rammed a car into a large crowd of revellers at a Christmas market in central Germany on Friday evening, killing at least two people and injuring more than 60 before he was arrested, authorities said.

One of the dead was a young child, said Reiner Haseloff, premier of the state of Saxony-Anhalt. The incident took place in Magdeburg, the state capital, 150 km (90 miles) west of Berlin.

"It is a catastrophe for the city of Magdeburg, for the state and for Germany in general," Haseloff said, adding that the death toll could rise given the severity of some of the injuries.

Haseloff described the attacker as a 50-year-old male doctor from Saudi Arabia with permanent residency in Germany, where he had lived for almost two decades.

"As things stand at the moment, we are talking about a lone offender, which means that there is no further danger to the city because we were able to arrest him."

The motive was unclear. The suspect was not known to German authorities as an Islamist, according to local broadcaster MDR.

A Saudi source told Reuters the kingdom had warned German authorities about the attacker, who the source said had posted extremist views on his personal X account.

Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry condemned the attack.



Following the incident, police cleared an area surrounding the vehicle to investigate a possible explosive device, local broadcaster MDR reported. It later cited police as saying that no such device had been found.

A police operation was also under way in the town of Bernburg, south of Magdeburg, where the suspect is believed to have lived, local newspaper Mitteldeutsche Zeitung reported.

Police were not immediately available to comment on the reports of a suspicious item or the operation in Bernburg.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who sent his thoughts to those affected in a post on social media platform X, is expected to visit the scene on Saturday with Interior Minister Nancy Faeser.

As news of the attack broke, Elon Musk, the billionaire allied with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, criticised Scholz and called on him to resign.

A video posted on social media from a position above the market shows a car driving at speed through a crowd walking between two rows of market stalls. People can be seen knocked to the ground and running away. Reuters was able to verify the location, with the trees, outline and design of the buildings matching file and satellite imagery of the area.

Footage from a local broadcaster showed people wrapped in blankets on the ground receiving care in the wake of the attack.

Bild newspaper quoted a witness identified only as Nadine saying she had been walking arm-in-arm with her boyfriend, Marco, when the car came hurtling towards them.

"He was hit and ripped away from my side," Bild cited her as saying, adding that he had been injured on his leg and head and taken to hospital but she did not know where to find him.

"The uncertainty is unbearable," she told Bild.

Late last month, Faeser advised people to be vigilant at Christmas markets, which have been a particular focus of security services as a potential target for extremist attacks.

Eight years ago, Anis Amri, a failed Tunisian asylum seeker with Islamist links, rammed a truck into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people and injuring dozens of others.

## U.S. to Announce Final Package of New Arms for Ukraine in Coming Days

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Biden administration will announce in the coming days its final Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative package, using up the remaining funds set aside to buy new weapons for Ukraine, according to two sources familiar with the matter.

The package includes air defense interceptors and artillery munitions, according to a third source, but the exact contents are expected when the package is announced in the coming days. The package will be worth about \$1.2 billion, said the sources.

Under USAI, military equipment is procured from the defense industry or partners, rather than drawn from American stocks, meaning it can take months or years to arrive on the battlefield.

The USAI package could be among the last steps the United States takes to provide direct military support to Ukraine as Kyiv braces for the return of President-elect Donald Trump, who has publicly questioned military aid and vowed to end the Ukraine war within 24 hours of taking office on Jan. 20.

Since Russia's invasion of its neighbor in February 2022, the United States has committed \$175 billion in aid for Ukraine, including approximately \$61.4 billion in security assistance.

About half of that security assistance has come through the USAI program, and the rest has gone toward pulling from existing military stocks via presidential drawdown authority.

There is \$5.6 billion remaining of presidential drawdown authority.



The State Department and Pentagon declined to comment on the upcoming announcement, saying they do not discuss security assistance packages before they are officially revealed.

The USAI program has been a boon for U.S. defense contractors, who have been able to book orders for newly manufactured weapons and establish new revenue streams.

One example is the L3Harris Technologies VAMPIRE system. The Vehicle-Agnostic Modular Palletized ISR Rocket Equipment counter-drone system received its first USAI-funded order in August 2022.

L3Harris delivered its first four units within 12 months. The company has seen increased interest in the system, and has subsequently had multiple orders placed through the USAI program.

As the Biden administration prepares to unveil details of the final USAI package, questions remain about how and whether the United States will continue to assist its ally in the absence of dedicated USAI funding.

During his campaign, Trump repeatedly questioned the level of U.S. involvement in the conflict, suggesting European allies should bear more of the financial burden. Some of his fellow Republicans - who will control both the House of Representatives and Senate starting next month - have also cooled on aid to Kyiv.

This stance - despite strong past support in the U.S. Congress for sustained or expanded support for Ukraine - has raised concerns among Ukraine's supporters in Washington about the future of U.S. assistance under a Trump administration.

## LeBron Breaks Abdul-Jabbar's 35-Year-Old Record for Most Career Minutes



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James broke Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's long standing NBA record for most minutes played in regular season history when he clocked his 57,447th minute in his team's win over Sacramento Kings.

Abdul-Jabbar, a six-time NBA champion and six-time Most Valuable Player, finished his career in 1989 having played 57,446 minutes.

James, who turns 40 later this month, broke the record 10 minutes into the 113-100 win in Sacramento -- the same team against which he made his NBA debut with the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2003.

"It's just a commitment to the craft and to the passion and love I have for the game. I don't take much time in the off-season. A little bit more time now," said James, who has played over 1,500 games in his career.

"I didn't take much time in the off-season, no matter if I was making the 10 Finals appearances back-to-back and just always trying to keep my body in tip-top shape."

With nearly 12,000 minutes in the playoffs, James has spent nearly 70,000 minutes on court since he started his career. He is currently in his 22nd NBA season.

Last year, James also surpassed Abdul-Jabbar to become the NBA's all-time leading scorer and now has more than 41,000 points to his name.

Meanwhile Donovan Mitchell scored 27 points to lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 124-101 home win over the Bucks, swiftly bringing Milwaukee down from its NBA Cup-championship high.

Five other Cavs scored in double-figures, including 16 by Darius Garland and 15 each from Evan Mobley

and Dean Wade. Jarrett Allen had 10 points and 10 rebounds.

Giannis Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee with 33 points along with 14 rebounds. Fellow star Damian Lillard did not travel with the team due to a right calf strain. Khris Middleton scored 14 off the bench.

The Bucks started poorly from deep (1-for-6) as the Cavs built early momentum and a 17-8 lead.

At the end of the first, Khris Middleton missed a 3-point attempt before fouling Mitchell on a shot from well beyond the arc, earning the Cleveland star three free throws to put the Cavs up 29-20.

Cleveland took the momentum into the second quarter, shooting 10-for-22 from beyond the arc in the half and leading 69-51 at the break

Mitchell had 16 in the half and three other Cavaliers were in double-figures. Antetokounmpo kept the Bucks in it with 18.

To begin the third, Cleveland went on a 12-5 run to take an 81-56 lead.

Late in the third, the Bucks went on a 9-3 spurt to bring their deficit below 20 points for the first time since the start of the half. However, Cleveland quickly vanquished any momentum.

Another sloppy end to a quarter for the Bucks, with a turnover on an inbounds pass and a Mitchell 3-pointer, put Cleveland up 103-76 heading into the fourth. Milwaukee pulled its starters to begin the final quarter.

The Cavaliers improve to 3-0 over Milwaukee this season after back-to-back wins in early November. The teams meet for the final time in the regular season on March 9 in Milwaukee.

## Fonseca Lauds Milan Character After Tough Win at Verona



VERONA (Dispatches) - AC Milan manager Paulo Fonseca acknowledged the challenges posed by missing players and recent form but expressed satisfaction with his team's hard-earned Serie A win at Hellas Verona.

A goal from Tijjani Reijnders in the second half secured a 1-0 win for Milan in a low-key clash.

Milan had secured just one win from their last five league matches with eight players sidelined due to injury, including forwards Alvaro Morata and Christian Pulisic.

"The first half was somewhat inevitable with so many players missing and not winning the most recent match, so we were sluggish," Fonseca told DAZN.

"Without so many players at the moment and our current form, I am satisfied with the victory, which was the most important thing. It was a much-deserved win, we kept a clean sheet and showed more stability in defence."

Milan enjoyed 65% of possession.

"It's true that we did not allow Verona much and dominated possession, but without being aggressive in the final third," Fonseca said.

"We made too many wrong decisions, that is also down to a lack of confidence, because we had the ball so often near the penalty area and should've done better."

Fonseca said the injury sustained by Rafael Leao in the first half was not too serious despite the Portugal international limping off.

"I spoke to Rafa (Leao), it doesn't seem to be anything particularly special. It's nothing major," Fonseca said.

## Bayern Munich Thrash Leipzig 5-1 to End Year in Style

MUNICH (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich stamped their authority over the Bundesliga in commanding style by hammering fourth-placed RB Leipzig 5-1 in a game that featured two goals in the opening two minutes for the first time in the league's history.

Having lost their first league match of the season to Mainz last week, Bayern delivered a commanding performance against a Leipzig side who struggled to build any attacking momentum.

Bayern top the standings on 36 points, seven clear of Bayer Leverkusen, who play Freiburg today. Eintracht Frankfurt are third on 27, ahead of Leipzig on goal difference.

It is the 26th time Bayern have topped the table at Christmas, having won the title in 23 of the 25 previous occasions they did so.

The game had a remarkable start when Harry Kane's neat backheel sent Michael Olise clear and he crossed for red-hot Jamal Musiala to tuck in after 28 seconds.

Leipzig hit back almost immediately as Lois Openda escaped down the right and his cross was swept home by Benjamin Sescó - the first time in Bundesliga history that two goals have been scored in the



first two minutes.

Bayern dominated the rest of the game and got their second in the 25th minute as former Leipzig man Konrad Laimer scored his first Bayern goal, side-footing in a volley from a clever Olise cross.

suffered a serious-looking injury in the final minute, collapsing to the turf away from play, and looked in real distress as he was carried off the pitch on a stretcher.

Joshua Kimmich smashed home a trademark long-range shot after 36 minutes to give the hosts a deserved 3-1 halftime lead, as Leipzig failed to muster another effort on goal.

The visitors showed a bit more attacking intent in the second half without looking dangerous as Bayern continued to create chances.

Olise curled just wide, Kane hit a powerful shot too close to goalkeeper Peter Gulacsi and Leroy Sane shot wide, before he latched on to a through ball by Alphonso Davies to slot in the fourth after 75 minutes.

Two minutes later Davies headed home the fifth from a perfect Kimmich cross.

A miserable night for Leipzig was completed when Benjamin Henrichs suffered a serious-looking injury in the final minute, collapsing to the turf away from play, and looked in real distress as he was carried off the pitch on a stretcher.

## Tsunoda Looks the Big Loser of Red Bull's F1 Reshuffle



LONDON (Dispatches) - Yuki Tsunoda will represent experience and continuity at Racing Bulls next year but, passed over for promotion, the Japanese looks to be running out of road at the Red Bull-owned Formula One team.

A flurry of Red Bull announcements culminated on Friday with 20-year-old Isack Hadjar confirmed as Tsunoda's teammate.

The Frenchman takes the seat vacated by New Zealander Liam Lawson, who joins four times champion Max Verstappen at the main team after Mexican Sergio Perez was dropped.

Tsunoda, 24, will be starting his fifth year with the team previously known as AlphaTauri and RB and has close ties to Red Bull's engine partners Honda.

The Japanese manufacturer is leaving Red Bull at the end of 2025, however, to work with Aston Martin.

"We're acutely aware that if we're not able to provide an opportunity for Yuki (at Red Bull) in all honesty this year, does it (keeping him on) make sense?" Red Bull team boss Christian Horner told reporters.

"You can't have a driver in the support team for five years. You can't always be the bridesmaid. You've either got to let them go at that point or look at something different."

Horner said he had spoken with Tsunoda, a fan favourite currently enjoying time off in Japan, and the driver was determined to show what he could do.

"I think he's very determined. He knows that things change very quickly," said the Briton. "Who would have thought nine months ago that we'd be sitting here talking about Liam Lawson being our driver for 2025?"

"Things change quickly in this industry and he's aware of that and he knows that he needs to be the one demonstrating that he's the one knocking on the door."

Italy-based Racing Bulls, who have had several name changes after Red Bull bought Minardi in 2005 and renamed them Toro Rosso, have always been a feeder for the title-winning main Milton Keynes team.

Drivers to have come through their ranks include four times world champions Sebastian Vettel and Verstappen as well as race winners Daniel Ricciardo, Pierre Gasly and Carlos Sainz.

Hadjar is one of a group of young prospects coming into the sport and Red Bull also have Arvid Lindblad as an exciting talent on the horizon.

Horner rates the 17-year-old, who has both British and Swedish nationality, particularly highly after a strong rookie season in Formula Three including a Silverstone double win.

Currently without a super-licence, Lindblad will be seeking the necessary points in New Zealand early next year before a full F2 season that could set him up for promotion in 2026 at Tsunoda's expense.

## Nadal Says He Thought About Taking a Mental Health Break a Few Years Ago

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal thought about taking a mental health break from tennis a few years ago but "conquered it by always moving forward" and "slowly became myself again," the 22-time Grand Slam champion writes in an essay posted online Tuesday, less than a month after the last match of his career.

"Physical pain I was very used to, but there were times on the court when I had trouble controlling my breathing, and I couldn't play at the highest level. I don't have trouble saying it now. After all, we are human beings, not superheroes," Nadal says on The Player's Tribune.

"Thankfully, I didn't get to the point of not being able to control things like anxiety, but there are moments with every player when it's difficult to control your mind, and when that happens it's difficult to have total control of your game," he says. "There were months when I thought about taking a complete break from tennis to cleanse my mind. In the end, I worked on it every day to get better."

The 38-year-old Nadal headed into retirement after playing for Spain in the Davis Cup in November, following two seasons filled with injury issues that limited him to competing only sparingly.

In the essay, he writes about the chronic pain in his left foot that first surfaced when he was 17 and says he was told then that he "would probably never play professional tennis again."



"I spent many days at home crying, but it was a great lesson in humility, and I was lucky to have a father — the real influence I've had in my life — who was always so positive," said Nadal, who won a record 14 championships at the French Open.

He mentions being nervous before matches, and some of the highlights of his career, and notes: "I hope that my legacy is that I always tried to treat others with deep respect. This was the golden rule of my parents."

Meanwhile former world number one Simona Halep has received a wildcard for Australian Open qualifying.

The 33-year-old Romanian was given a four-year doping ban that was reduced to nine months this year.

Halep, who maintained her innocence after being charged with two separate doping offences, returned to action in Miami in March and last competed on the WTA Tour in October in Hong Kong, where she lost in the first round.

The former French Open and Wimbledon champion is ranked 877 in the world.

Halep was runner-up to Caroline Wozniacki in the 2018 Australian Open final.

She reached the fourth round on her most recent appearance in 2022.

"I have been working hard to get ready for the 2025 season," said Halep.

"The Australian Open has provided me with some of the best moments in my career, so I can't wait to be back in Melbourne and playing in front of the Aussie fans."

Sixteen-year-old Australian Cruz Hewitt will aim to emulate father Lleyton by making his Grand Slam debut at the Australian Open after he was handed a qualifying wildcard.

Lleyton Hewitt, a two-time Grand Slam champion and former world number one, made his major debut as a 15-year-old at Melbourne Park after coming through qualifying in 1997.

Qualifying runs from 6-9 January and the Australian Open starts on 12 January.