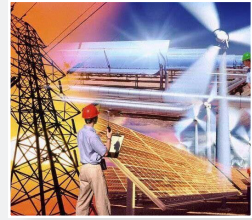


Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Has Initiated Steps to Prevent the Auction of Two Historic Coins From the Achaemenid and Sassanid Eras, Slated to Be Sold in the United States Next Month

# IRAN NEWS

Energy Minister Abbas Aliabadi Says 6 Gigawatts (GW) of New Electricity Capacity Will Be Connected to the Country's Power Grid by Next Summer, adding That the New Capacity Will Include 3 GW of Renewable Power Plants.

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### \$35b in Engineering Services Exported by Iran Over Three Decades

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### Suspect in Deadly Berlin Christmas Market Attack Railed Against Islam, Germany



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### No Difference Between Iranian Identity and Islamic Identity



TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts emphasized that Iranian and Islamic identities coexist harmoniously in Iran, stating that Iranians celebrate cultural traditions such as Yalda and Chaharshanbe Suri alongside religious occasions like Ashura and Tasua.

According to a report from the Public Relations and Information Center of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri made this statement during the third annual global Yalda celebration held on Saturday evening, December 21, at the Sa'dabad Cultural and Historical Complex. The event was attended by foreign ambassadors, cultural heritage experts, artists, and researchers.

Salehi Amiri remarked, "Our identity, character, and survival depend on the vitality and resilience of Iran. Iran is a lasting presence in our ancestry and history."

He highlighted Iran's cultural richness, describing it as a "magnet" that draws global admiration. "Iran's historical and civilizational status places it among the top 10 countries in the world. We have identified one million heritage sites and registered over 40,000 of them nationally," he said.

The minister also underscored the importance of the Persian language, calling it a unifying spirit for Iranians worldwide. "The continuity of the Persian language for over a thousand years demonstrates the cultural perseverance of this land and is a key to its enduring legacy."

Salehi Amiri pointed out the pride derived from Iran's cultural diversity, saying, "Throughout history, nothing has caused Iran to falter. Azerbaijanis have lived here for thousands of years, contributing as a beloved part of the nation. Similarly, Kurds, with their artistic heritage, have been a significant presence for millennia."

He went on to highlight the rich histories of other ethnic groups: "The people of Sistan and Baluchestan have a history spanning over 5,000 years and are known for their bravery and resilience. The Arab community, living in Iran since pre-Islamic times, shares a deep affinity for this land and the Ahl al-Bayt (Prophet Muhammad's family)."

Additionally, he praised the Turkmen people for their noble character, noting, "This diverse society is not artificial; it has organically existed in Iran for centuries. This cultural diversity makes Iran a land of unity and coexistence."

### Scandalous Detention of Iranians by U.S. to Extort Information



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Two Iranian nationals have been recently arrested in the United States and Italy on allegations of involvement in equipping drones allegedly used in attacks on American forces—a claim Iran has strongly rejected as baseless.

On the evening of December 16, Mohammad Abedini Najafabadi, 38, a mechanical engineering graduate from Sharif University of Technology, was detained by Italian police at Milan Airport while preparing to travel to Switzerland. The arrest, carried out at the request of the United States, has cut off all direct contact with him.

Meanwhile, Mahdi Mohammadsadeghi, 42, a US resident, was arrested in Massachusetts around the same time.

According to reports, the arrests of the two individuals are allegedly linked to a January 28 drone attack carried out by Iraqi armed groups against a US military outpost in Jordan known as Tower 22.

The attack killed three American soldiers and injured 47 others. The FBI claims that the equipment used in the drone attack was supplied by these two individuals.

A university peer of Mohammad Abedini told Tasnim News Agency that Abedini is an Iranian national and the CEO of Sanat Danesh Rahpooyan Aflak (SDRA), a company in Iran specializing in precision measurement equipment.



TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has asserted that Iran does not have any proxy forces in West Asia, dismissing claims that the country has lost its so-called proxies in the region.

He made the remarks on Sunday during a meeting with a group of religious eulogists on the occasion of the birthday anniversary of Hazrat Fatemeh Zahra (SA), the beloved daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The Leader contended that the resistance fighters in Yemen, and groups such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are fighting because of their faith.

"They (the enemies) consistently say that the Islamic Republic has lost its regional proxies—this is yet another mistake! The Islamic Republic does not have any proxy forces," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

Resistance fighters, he explained, "are driven by their beliefs; they fight because of their convictions, not on our behalf."

He also noted that should Iran ever decide to take action, it would not require a proxy force to do so.

In regard to the situation in Syria, the Leader foresaw the emergence of a "strong and honorable establishment."

The United States' plot to dominate countries involves establishing a dictatorship or fomenting chaos and riots, with the latter being the case in Syria, he added.

He added: I predict the emergence of a strong and honorable movement in Syria as well.

He further said: A young Syrian has nothing to lose. His university is unsafe, his school is unsafe, his home is unsafe, his streets are unsafe, and his life is unsafe. What should he do?

The Leader reiterated that Iranians must stand strong and determined against those who have designed this insecurity and those who have implemented it. God willing, he will prevail over

them, adding that Tomorrow in the region will, by God's grace, be better than today.

"The Americans, the Zionist regime, and their allies mistakenly believe they have emerged victorious, leading them to make absurd statements," he said, referencing comments from a US official that appeared to promise support for anyone inciting unrest in Iran.

"The Iranian nation will trample under its strong feet anyone who assumes a mercenary role for the US in this matter."

Then he touched upon the auspicious day, saying: God Almighty has presented two women as role models for all humanity, both men and women.

He added: These two women were chosen by God as models not just for women but for all humankind.

The Supreme Leader noted: There is a narration, widely transmitted through both Shia and Sunni traditions, that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "My daughter Fatimah surpasses these two women in virtue and merit." When it is said that they are role models, it is not only about their virtue. It is essential to understand that they serve as examples and peaks of human excellence. While we may not fully reach their level, we must strive to move toward that lofty ideal.

He also said: Explaining the pressing issues of the time is a highly significant duty. Following the example of Lady Fatimah Zahra (peace be upon her), engaging in the clarification of truths is a critical responsibility.

He reiterated recitation and eulogizing, inspired by Lady Fatimah, is a powerful means of conveying truth.

The Leader added: Lady Fatimah Zahra (peace be upon her) loves those who adopt her qualities as a life model. One of these qualities is the commitment to clarification. From the very beginning, she dedicated herself to explaining truths to her listeners—those who were unaware, those who ignored the truth, or those who had forgotten it. She reminded them of what was right and true.

## Resolving National Challenges: President Emphasizes Dialogue and Respect

TEHRAN - During a ceremony held to honor women on the birth anniversary of Hazrat Fatima Zahra (PBUH), President Masoud Pezeshkian highlighted the importance of addressing national challenges through dialogue and mutual respect.

Speaking at the event, President Pezeshkian reflected on the societal values during the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), noting the transformative perspective the Prophet brought to the status of women. "In those times, having sons was seen as a source of pride, while daughters were viewed as a burden. Yet, the Prophet was blessed with a daughter, and the Quran described her as 'Kawthar,' symbolizing abundance and blessing," he remarked.

The president emphasized the fundamental message of the prophets, stating, "Prophets were sent to ensure human rights are respected and justice prevails. These principles must transcend gender, ethnicity, and religion. We must listen to the truth, accept it, and act accordingly."

Highlighting the importance of fostering mutual respect, he noted, "Conflicts arise when we ignore others' rights. Every individual deserves respect, and we must strive to protect these rights."

Addressing a comment from an attendee about the absence of a cohesive political party structure in the country, President Pezeshkian acknowledged the gap, stating, "We lack a unified party that sets clear strategies for areas like economics, politics, and markets. It is



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crucial to support groups and organizations dedicated to these efforts."

The president also touched on the concept of meritocracy, quoting the Quran, "Superiority lies in piety, not gender or status. True piety is acting without error, and those who demonstrate this should be honored."

He reiterated his administration's commitment to empowering women, saying, "We are creating opportunities for women and girls to contribute meaningfully. Their participation is vital in solving the nation's problems."

Criticizing divisive attitudes, President Pezeshkian stated, "Today, instead of focusing on serving the people and saving Iran, we have become divided along

political lines, appearances, and other superficial differences. Our priority should be addressing the challenges faced by the public, irrespective of province, religion, or gender."

He further acknowledged the crucial role of women, saying, "No man or institution has succeeded without the support of a creative and capable woman. Women's involvement strengthens and sustains progress."

On conflict resolution, the president emphasized respect for differing views and constructive dialogue. "Development means respecting the culture of others. Problems cannot be solved through conflict and hostility. We must discuss and resolve issues without creating unnecessary strife, as disputes harm both the people and the country."

### Israel's Sponsors Accountable for Ongoing Aggression on Sanaa



SANAA (Dispatches) - Yemen's foreign minister has condemned the recent US airstrikes in Sana'a, asserting that any nation supporting the Zionist regime's aggression shares responsibility for its atrocities.

"Any country that supports the Zionist regime in any way in its aggression against Sana'a is a partner in this aggression, and must assume responsibility for the repercussions of such conduct," Jamal Ahmed Ali Amer wrote in a post on X (formerly Twitter) on Sunday.

He also warned Western countries of the disastrous consequences of their support for the Israeli regime's ongoing aggression against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, saying they will have to pay a heavy price and must brace themselves for a strong response.

"The terrified Zionist regime, which speaks of a bank of targets inside Yemen, has demonstrated its failure and defeat by bombing facilities that have already been struck," the senior Yemeni diplomat pointed out.

The remarks came after the United States military said it had conducted a series of air strikes against targets in Yemen's capital Sana'a, including a missile storage facility and a "command-and-control" site.

US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees US Army operations in West Asia, added it also hit multiple one-way drones and an anti-ship cruise missile over the Red Sea.

The Yemeni information minister also condemned in the strongest terms the recent US military airstrikes against Sana'a.

"It is fairly evident that Americans have not learned from their past mistakes, and will continue to taste humiliation at the hands of Yemenis," Hashem Sharaf al-Din noted.

A senior member of the political bureau of the Ansarullah resistance movement also warned that the United States and Israel would face severe consequences if they escalate tensions and expand their acts of aggression against Yemen.

Hizam al-Assad stated that his group is prepared for a full-scale war.

"Sana'a is not afraid of the spread of war. It is America that should be afraid, as its interests and assets are widespread in our region."

"We are not fearful of a full-scale war being imposed on us. The US and the Zionist regime should be scared of such an event because the outcome will not be in their favor at all," he added.

He stressed that US interests in West Asia are extensive, and the existence of the Tel Aviv regime hinges upon the equation of security, military superiority, and deterrence, which no longer exists.

"The attacks by the US, Britain, and the Zionist regime [on Yemen] are a sign of their defeat and confusion. We have no apprehension about Yemen's military capabilities and prowess."

"Yemen's military capabilities and hardware have been developed for difficult war conditions. Homegrown Yemeni munitions are being stored in safe places, and the country's diverse natural features have also contributed to such security," Assad stated.

Yemenis have declared their open support for Palestine's struggle against the Israeli occupation since the regime launched a devastating war on Gaza on October 7, 2023, after the territory's resistance movements carried out Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against the occupying entity.

# IRAN NEWS



## MPs Endorse General Provisions of Free Trade Bill With EAEU

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Members of the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) have agreed on the general provisions of the bill for a free trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and its member states.

On Sunday, the parliament reviewed its Economic Commission's report on the bill for the free trade agreement, and the lawmakers ratified the overall provisions.

According to the bill, the free trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU and its member states includes a preamble, 147 articles, and 6 annexes, as well as authorization for the exchange of documents.

Iran and EAEU reached a preferential trade agreement in 2018, which came into effect on October 27, 2019. The union previously signed an interim agreement on free trade with Iran on March 14, 2022.

## Inadequate Transport Systems Hinder Entry into African Markets



TEHRAN - A member of the Iran-Africa Joint Chamber of Commerce has identified the lack of adequate transportation infrastructure as one of the primary obstacles to entering African markets.

Speaking at a seminar on the export of oil, gas, and petrochemical products to Africa on Sunday, Ali Abbasi highlighted the significant volume of Iranian exports in these sectors and emphasized the need to address challenges to ensure sustainable growth.

Abbasi pointed to a lack of cooperation among traders active in African markets as a barrier to broader participation and more substantial activity. He added that monopolistic practices by certain traders have excluded others from accessing these markets.

He emphasized that the absence of an efficient transport system to Africa, coupled with high freight costs, has made Iranian products less competitive compared to rivals. Additionally, prolonged transportation times have exacerbated the problem, posing a risk of losing access to the African market altogether.

Abbasi also cited sanctions and the inability to establish financial exchanges between Iran and Africa as critical challenges. He warned that unresolved financial issues could jeopardize Iran's foothold in African markets.

Moreover, he noted the lack of familiarity with African markets and the limited presence in exhibitions across the continent as other key issues. "Africa has the potential to serve as a gateway to overcoming economic challenges and fostering growth," Abbasi stated.

The official revealed that Iran exports between 300,000 and 400,000 tons of urea annually to Africa, along with various types of base oils. He concluded by stressing the importance of providing necessary support to preserve Iran's market presence in Africa.

## \$35b in Engineering Services Exported by Iran Over Three Decades



TEHRAN - The Secretary of the Iranian Construction Companies Syndicate announced that Iranian companies and the private sector have exported \$35 billion worth of engineering and technical services since 1995.

In a press briefing on Saturday, Iraj Golabtoonchi stated that this achievement spans over 1,000 projects implemented abroad by capable Iranian companies from 1995 to 2023.

Golabtoonchi noted that exports faced a decline after 2011 but experienced a boost in 2016 when Iranian companies re-entered the Iraqi market, securing \$2 billion in projects that year. However, the sector's growth has been hindered since 2022 due to ongoing sanctions, difficulties obtaining bid guarantees, and other obstacles.

He emphasized the need for Iranian firms to elevate their quality standards to international levels and strengthen their engineering capabilities by hiring skilled professionals.

Highlighting opportunities in neighboring regions, including Shanghai Cooperation Organization countries, Iraq, CIS nations, and even Gulf states, Golabtoonchi called for leveraging Iran's experience to expand its market share. However, he lamented the lack of global recognition, noting that no Iranian company ranks among the world's top 250 engineering firms as per ENR rankings, whereas China has 70 representatives, and Turkey has 45.

He pointed out that while Iran's market presence shrank, Turkish firms filled the gap. For example, while Iran managed \$2 billion in projects in Iraq, Turkish companies executed \$24 billion worth of projects simultaneously.

Of Iran's \$2 billion in projects, \$700 million were located in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, involving 37

companies managing 57 projects. However, political disputes between Iraq's central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over budget allocations have delayed payments, leaving \$500 million of these projects unpaid.

In Syria, six to seven Iranian firms had been active in providing engineering services, but due to ongoing challenges, they have withdrawn their personnel, although some equipment and unpaid claims remain.

Sanctions have further complicated Iranian companies' operations, as securing bid guarantees for projects in Iraq, CIS countries, and elsewhere has proven difficult.

According to Golabtoonchi, the national budget for this year includes provisions for resolving guarantee issues through the Ministry of Economy if companies win new projects. However, no company has successfully utilized this mechanism so far. He suggested that using local currencies or Iran's foreign-held reserves could serve as guarantees, a topic discussed during the recent visit of the President and Minister of Economic Affairs to Iraq.

Golabtoonchi also announced the upcoming 27th Annual National Conference of the International Concrete Association (Iran branch) and the National Conference on Concrete and Earthquakes. This year's event will focus on strengthening industry-university collaboration to address workforce shortages, operational reductions in the construction sector, and declining interest among students in engineering disciplines.

The conference will dedicate a day to showcasing student projects to highlight academic contributions to the industry. Golabtoonchi stressed the need for more practical training in universities to bridge the gap between education and industry requirements.

## Iran and Serbia Explore Cooperation Opportunities in Energy and Agriculture



TEHRAN - In a webinar hosted by the Yazd Chamber of Commerce, Faraz Chamani, Iran's commercial attaché in Belgrade, highlighted Serbia's emerging economy and its potential for trade and investment. Despite its small size, Serbia offers opportunities in various sectors, including IT, medical services, agricultural trade, energy, and environmental technologies.

Discussing Serbia's foreign trade in 2023, Chamani stated that the country's exports amounted to approximately \$31 billion. Key export items included automobiles, metal products, furniture, processed foods, industrial machinery, chemicals, sugar, rubber, clothing, and pharmaceuticals. These products were primarily exported to Balkan countries, Russia, China, Germany, Italy, Eurasian countries, and the Middle East.

Serbia, however, recorded a negative trade balance, with imports exceeding \$33 billion in 2023. The main imported items included fossil fuels, coal, industrial machinery, electrical equipment, rubber and plastic materials, automobiles, railway equipment, pharmaceuticals, iron and steel, aluminum, paper, glass products, dairy, eggs, honey, beverages, and various agricultural and industrial products.

Chamani emphasized Serbia's investment potential in agriculture, particularly in fruit, vegetable, grain, and livestock production. The Serbian government offers subsidies to foreign investors for purchasing agricultural equipment, seedlings, and livestock. Additional financial support is provided for irrigation systems and soil quality improvement.

Serbia's free trade zones were highlighted as attractive areas for investment, offering tax exemptions for producers, incentives for foreign direct investments, simplified customs procedures, and zero tariffs on imports and exports within these zones. Chamani stressed the ease of conducting business in Serbia, though finding a knowledgeable local partner with a strong market presence is essential.

Despite significant economic and administrative reforms, Chamani pointed out challenges, including weak rule of law, political interference in the economy, a slow judicial system, and complex bureaucratic procedures. Legal unpredictability and opaque procurement processes also pose hurdles.

## Iranian Contractors Exit Syria, Turks Take Lead in Global Markets

TEHRAN - Iraj Golabtoonchi, Secretary of the Syndicate of Iranian Construction Companies, spoke at a press conference for the Annual National Conference of the International Concrete Institute (ACI) Iran Branch and the National Conference on Concrete and Earthquakes. Discussing the involvement of Iranian companies abroad and the export of technical and engineering services, he stated that since 1995, Iranian contractors have undertaken \$35 billion worth of projects globally.

Golabtoonchi highlighted the current situation of Iranian companies in Syria, revealing that approximately 6-7 Iranian firms were previously active in the country. However, all Iranian personnel and resources have now exited Syria. Although some payments remain pending, companies managed to retrieve their equipment before departure.

Regarding the reduction in the export of technical and engineering services, Golabtoonchi noted: "Over nearly three decades, we achieved \$35 billion in contracts worldwide. However, the rate of exports began declining in 2011. This trend reversed in 2016 when we secured \$2 billion in contracts with Iraq. Unfortunately, domestic conflicts in Iraq and the COVID-19 pandemic caused a slowdown. Since 2022, the trend has picked up again."

In response to about which countries have replaced Iran in global markets, Golabtoonchi said:

"Turkish companies have overtaken Iranian firms in Iraq, where Iran's contracts were valued at \$2 billion, compared to Turkey's



contracts reaching \$24 billion. Turkish economic diplomacy has outpaced ours, and they are now a dominant player in Russia as well."

On pending payments in Iraqi Kurdistan, Golabtoonchi disclosed: "Of the \$2 billion in contracts Iranian companies had in Iraq, \$700 million pertained to Kurdistan, where 38 Iranian firms undertook 57 projects. Challenges such as regional conflicts and budget distribution disputes halted Iranian operations, leaving \$500 million in outstanding payments."

At the same event, Mostafa Ahmadvand, Head of Iran's Concrete Research Center, addressed environmental concerns related to cement factories: "For the first time, laboratory-scale CO2-free cement has been produced. It will be unveiled at the National Conference on Concrete and Earthquakes."

Ahmadvand also discussed initiatives to tackle construction waste, emphasizing the need for recycling infrastructure to produce sustainable concrete. He called for collaboration among civil organizations, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders to improve construction quality and promote eco-friendly, durable concrete capable of withstanding harsh environments, including corrosive coastal climates and earthquake zones.

Both speakers emphasized the need to strengthen Iran's presence in global markets, improve domestic production standards, and address environmental challenges to remain competitive in construction and engineering sectors.

## Tehran to Host Eurasia Trade Conference and Exhibition



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TEHRAN - Tehran Chamber of Commerce, in collaboration with Pars Karen Trade Management Company and with the authorization of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, is organizing the third Eurasia International Trade Conference and Exhibition from February 21 to 24, 2025, at the Tehran International Permanent Fairground.

Following Iran's approval of membership in the parliaments of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states, trade exchanges with Armenia, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are expected to be facilitated, creating significant opportunities for the growth of international trade and economic interactions.

The preferential trade agreement signed between Iran and EAEU countries in January 2024, covering 87% of their trade goods under free trade terms, aims to eliminate trade barriers, establish a common market, and harmonize customs and financial policies among member states. This transition to a free trade agreement highlights the importance of Iran's accession to the union.

This year's event aims to familiarize Iranian traders, businesspeople, and companies with the regulations and opportunities of the agreement. Over the four-day event, discussions will focus on strategies to enhance trade exchanges, promote joint investments, improve industrial cooperation, and expand exports of Iranian products. The event will feature international guests, including representatives from chambers of commerce, government officials, and economic experts from EAEU countries.

## Daily Gasoline Consumption in Tehran Reaches 22m Liters



TEHRAN - Fereydoun Yasemi, Managing Director of the Tehran Regional Oil Products Distribution Company, announced during a media visit to the Rey Oil Depot that the facility remains one of the country's strategic hubs. He stated that over 25 million liters of petroleum products are loaded daily at the depot, with the eastern and western depots collectively transferring approximately 15 million liters per day.

Yasemi emphasized the depot operates 24/7 in four shifts to ensure uninterrupted fuel supply. He added that 40 oil tankers, each with a capacity of 30,000 liters, are loaded within 40 minutes simultaneously. The facility is equipped with 104 loading lines, including rail systems, ensuring efficient distribution with no significant supply issues reported.

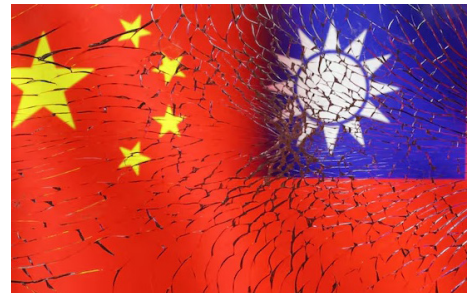
Yasemi confirmed that there are no shortages in fuel provision for the Damavand and Parand power plants. During the past week, despite public holidays, fuel was supplied to 77 units in Shamsabad and 30 units in the Abbasabad industrial area, based on requests submitted via the national fuel distribution system and approved by relevant authorities.

The daily average gasoline consumption in Tehran Province stands at 22 million liters, marking a 5% year-on-year increase. However, Yasemi noted that this growth is below the national average. Regarding premium gasoline, Yasemi stated it is distributed periodically at fueling stations depending on production levels at refineries.

Diesel consumption has decreased by 2-3%, attributed to some production units switching to natural gas and improved consumption controls. Yasemi highlighted that 60% of diesel usage is in the transportation sector, where better consumption management has led to a year-on-year reduction.

## China Calls Taiwan a Red Line

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China criticised new U.S. military aid to Taiwan on Sunday, saying the \$571 million package seriously violates the "one China principle" and provisions of joint communiqués between China and the U.S. China will take "all necessary measures" to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity, a foreign ministry spokesperson said, calling Taiwan "a red line that must not be crossed" in China-U.S. relations, according to a statement released by the ministry. Beijing considers democratically governed Taiwan its own territory, a claim the government in Taipei rejects.



# IRAN NEWS

## Syria's New Rulers Name HTS Commander as Defense Minister



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria's new rulers have appointed Murhaf Abu Qasra, a leading figure in the insurgency which toppled Bashar al-Assad, as defence minister in the interim government, an official source said.

Abu Qasra, who is also known by the nom de guerre Abu Hassan 600, is a senior figure in the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group which led the campaign that ousted Assad this month. He led numerous military operations during Syria's revolution, the source said.

Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa discussed "the form of the military institution in the new Syria" during a meeting with armed factions on Saturday, state news agency SANA reported.

Abu Qasra during the meeting sat next to Sharaa, also known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, photos published by SANA showed.

Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir said this week that the defence ministry would be restructured using former rebel factions and officers who defected from Assad's army.

Bashir, who formerly led an HTS-affiliated administration in the northwestern province of Idlib, has said he will lead a three-month transitional government. The new administration has not declared plans for what will happen after that.

Earlier on Saturday, the ruling General Command named Asaad Hassan al-Shibani as foreign minister, SANA said. A source in the new administration told Reuters that this step "comes in response to the aspirations of the Syrian people to establish international relations that bring peace and stability".

Shibani, a 37-year-old graduate of Damascus University, previously led the political department of the rebels' Idlib government, the General Command said.

Sharaa's group was part of al Qaeda until he broke ties in 2016. It had been confined to Idlib for years until going on the offensive in late November, sweeping through the cities of western Syria and into Damascus as the army melted away.

Sharaa has met with a number of international envoys this week. He has said his primary focus is on reconstruction and achieving economic development and that he is not interested in engaging in any new conflicts.

## Rival Protests Over South Korea's Impeached President Yoon Held in Seoul



SEOUL (Dispatches) - Demonstrators supporting and opposing South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol held rival protests several hundred metres apart in Seoul on Saturday, a week after he was impeached over his short-lived declaration of martial law.

Yoon's presidential powers are suspended but he remains in office. He has not complied with various summonses by authorities investigating whether martial law, which he declared late on Dec. 3 and rescinded hours later, constituted insurrection.

He has also not responded to attempts to contact him by the Constitutional Court, which decides whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential powers. The court plans to hold its first preparatory hearing on Friday.

Saturday's pro- and anti-Yoon protests were held in Gwanghwamun in the heart of the capital. There were no clashes as of 4 p.m. (0700 GMT).

Tens of thousands of anti-Yoon protesters, dominated by people in their 20s and 30s, gathered around 3 p.m., waving K-Pop light sticks and signs with sayings such as "Arrest! Imprison! Insurrection chief Yoon Suk Yeol!" to catchy K-pop tunes.



## Suspect in Deadly Berlin Christmas Market Attack Railed Against Islam, Germany

MAGDEBURG (Dispatches) - The Saudi suspect in Germany's deadly car-ramming attack on a Christmas market held strongly anti-Islam views and was angry with Germany's migrant and asylum policy, officials said.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz condemned the "terrible, insane" attack that killed five people and shocked the nation, days before Christmas and eight years after a jihadist drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin.

Police were puzzling over the motive of Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, the main suspect after an SUV ploughed at high speed through a dense crowd in the eastern city of Magdeburg Friday.

As well as killing five people, the vehicle wounded 205 others. A nine-year-old child was among the dead and casualties were being treated in 15 regional hospitals.

Germany has been hit by multiple deadly jihadist attacks, but evidence gathered by investigators and his past online posts painted a different picture of Abdulmohsen, a 50-year-old doctor of psychiatry.

In an unpublished interview with AFP from 2022 for an unrelated story, Abdulmohsen presented himself as "a Saudi atheist". He has helped Saudi women flee their country — but also railed against what he saw as Germany's permissive attitude towards refugees from other mainly Muslim countries.

Interior Minister Nancy Fraser said he held "Islamophobic" views. And a prosecutor said that "the background to the crime... could have been disgruntlement with the way Saudi Arabian refugees are treated in Germany".

Taha Al-Hajji of the Berlin-based European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights told AFP Abdulmohsen was "a psychologically disturbed person with an exaggerated sense of self-importance".

In his online posts, Abdulmohsen spoke about his troubles with and suspicions of German authorities.

Last August, he posted on social media: "Is there a path to justice in Germany without blowing up a German embassy or randomly slaughtering German citizens?... If anyone knows it, please let me know."

Die Welt daily reported, citing security sources, that German state and federal police had carried out a "risk assessment" on him last year but concluded that he posed "no specific danger".

A sombre Scholz, dressed in black, visited the attack site yesterday together with national and regional politicians laying flowers outside the main church in Magdeburg.

Local people have left candles, flowers, cards and children's toys at the Johanneskirche church, where Scholz and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier later joined a memorial service.

Scholz pledged the state would respond "with the full force of the law" to the attack. But he also called for unity as Germany has been rocked by a heated debate on immigration and security ahead of elections in February.

It was important "that we stick together, that we link arms, that it is not hatred that determines our coexistence but the fact that we are a community that seeks a common future", he said.

US President Joe Biden later joined other world leaders in voicing his condolences "to the people of Germany grieving the terrible attack".

"No community — and no family — should have to endure such a despicable and dark event, especially just days before a holiday of joy and peace."

Pope Francis also offered condolences to the German president in a telegram.

Scholz said he was grateful for the expressions of solidarity from around the world. "It is good to hear that we as Germans are not alone in the face of this terrible catastrophe."

Surveillance video footage of the attack showed a black BMW racing straight through the crowd, scattering bodies amid the festive stalls that were selling traditional handicrafts, snacks and mulled wine.

## U.S. Senate Passes Gov't Funding Bill, Averts Shutdown

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. Congress passed spending legislation early on Saturday in a down-to-the wire burst of activity that will avert a destabilizing government shutdown ahead of the busy holiday travel season.

The Democratic-controlled Senate in an 85-11 vote passed the bill to continue government funding 38 minutes after it expired at midnight (0500 GMT Saturday). The government did not invoke shutdown procedures in the interim.

The bill will now be sent to White House, where President Joe Biden is expected to sign it into law.

The package had earlier cleared the Republican-controlled House of Representatives with bipartisan support.

The late-night vote capped a frantic week that saw President-elect Donald Trump and his billionaire ally Elon Musk defeat an initial bipartisan deal, throwing Congress into disarray.

The final version stripped out some provisions championed by Democrats, who accused Republicans of caving in to pressure from an unelected billionaire who has no experience in government.

Congress did not act on Trump's demand to raise the debt ceiling, a politically difficult task, before he takes office on Jan. 20.

The federal government spent roughly \$6.2 trillion last year and has more than \$36 trillion in debt, and Congress will need to act to authorize further borrowing by the middle of next year.

The legislation would extend government funding until March 14, provide \$100 billion for disaster-hit states and \$10 billion for farmers, and extend farm and food aid programs due to expire at the end of the year.

Some Republicans voted against the package because it did not cut spending. House Speaker Mike Johnson said the party will have more influence next year,



when they will have majorities in both chambers of Congress and Trump will be in the White House.

"This was a necessary step to bridge the gap, to put us into that moment where we can put our fingerprints on the final decisions on spending," he told reporters after the House vote. He said Trump supported the package.

A government shutdown would have disrupted everything from law enforcement to national parks and suspended paychecks for millions of federal workers.

A travel industry trade group warned it could cost airlines, hotels and other companies \$1 billion per week and lead to widespread disruptions during the busy Christmas season. Authorities warned travelers could face long lines at airports.

The package resembled a bipartisan plan that was abandoned earlier this week after an online fusillade from Trump and Musk, who said it contained too many

unrelated provisions, such as a pay raise for lawmakers and a crackdown on pharmacy benefit managers.

Republicans struck most of those elements from the bill - including a provision limiting investments in China which Democrats said would have conflicted with Musk's interests.

"He clearly does not want to answer questions about how much he plans to expand his businesses in China and how many American technologies he plans to sell," Democratic Representative Rosa DeLauro said on the House floor.

Trump has tasked Musk, the world's richest person, with heading a budget-cutting task force but he will hold no official position in Washington.

Musk wrote on his social media platform X that he was happy with the package. "It went from a bill that weighed pounds to a bill that weighed ounces," he posted.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said his party still achieved some of its goals and prevented Republicans from enacting a debt-ceiling hike that would make it easier to cut taxes.

"We have successfully advanced the needs of everyday Americans, but there are still things to be worked on and we look forward to that fight in the new year," he told reporters.

Trump's demand to lift the debt ceiling was resoundingly rejected by the House - including 38 Republicans - on Thursday.

Johnson said lawmakers would look at the issue in January.

Representative Rich McCormick, one of 34 Republicans who voted against the Friday bill, said it did nothing to change the nation's fiscal trajectory and would only add to the debt load.

## Turkey Will Do Whatever It Takes If Syria Gov't Cannot Address Kurd Militia Issue

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey will do "whatever it takes" to ensure its security if the new Syrian administration cannot address Ankara's concerns about U.S.-allied Kurdish groups it views as terrorist groups, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said.

Turkey regards the YPG, the militant group spearheading the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants who have fought an insurgency against the Turkish state for 40 years and are deemed terrorists by Ankara, Washington, and the European Union.

Hostilities have escalated since the toppling of Bashar al-Assad less than two weeks ago, with Turkey and Syrian groups it backs seizing the city of Manbij from the SDF on Dec. 9. Assad's fall has left the Kurdish factions on the back foot as they seek to retain political gains made in the last 13 years.

In an interview with France 24, Fidan said Ankara's preferred option was for the new administration in Damascus to address the problem in line with Syria's territorial unity, sovereignty, and integrity, adding that the YPG should be disbanded immediately.

"If it doesn't happen, we have to protect our own national security," he said. When asked if that included military action, Fidan said: "whatever it takes."

Asked about SDF commander Mazloum Abdi's comments about the possibility of a negotiated solution with Ankara, Fidan said the group should seek such a settlement with Damascus, as there was "a new reality" there now.

"The new reality, hopefully, they will address these issues, but at the same time, (the)



YPG/PKK, they know what we want. We don't want to see any form of military threat to ourselves. Not the present one, but also the potential one," he added.

Ankara, alongside Syrian allies, has mounted several cross-border offensives against the YPG-led SDF in northern Syria, while repeatedly demanding that its NATO ally Washington halt support for the fighters.

The U.S.-backed SDF played a major role defeating Islamic State militants in 2014-2017 with U.S. air support, and still guards its fighters in prison camps. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that the Islamist group would try to re-establish capabilities in this period.

Fidan said he didn't find the recent uptick in U.S. troops in Syria to be the "right decision", adding the battle against Islamic State was an "excuse" to maintain support for the SDF.

"The fight against ISIS, there is only one job: to keep ISIS prisoners in prisons, that's it," he said.

Fidan also said that the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which swept into Damascus to topple Assad, had "excellent cooperation" with Ankara in the battle against Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the past through intelligence sharing.

He also said Turkey was not in favour of any foreign bases, including Russian ones, remaining in Syria, but that the choice was up to the Syrian people.



## Villa Heap Pain on Man City by Delivering Ninth Defeat

LONDON (Dispatches) - Crisis-hit Manchester City slumped to an unthinkable ninth defeat in 12 matches at Aston Villa yesterday as Arsenal dismantled Crystal Palace 5-1 to reignite their Premier League title charge.

Nottingham Forest stormed Brentford's fortress to briefly climb to third in the table and Alexander Isak scored his first hat-trick in the English top flight as Newcastle ran riot at Ipswich.

City boss Pep Guardiola — in the worst spell of his managerial career — made multiple changes following last week's painful derby defeat to Manchester United but it was to no avail as his injury-hit side lost 2-1.

Jhon Duran scored his seventh Premier League goal of the season to put Villa ahead in the 16th minute and Morgan Rogers doubled the advantage for the impressive home side in the 65th minute.

Phil Foden scored his first top-flight goal of the season in stoppage time but it proved too little too late for the flailing champions, whose spark has vanished.

City have now lost six Premier League games in the current campaign, twice as many as they suffered during the whole of last season, when they were crowned champions for the fourth time in a row.

Guardiola said he trusted his players to turn things around despite their shocking run of just one win from their past 12 games in all competitions.

"We have to think positive and I have incredible trust in the guys," he told the BBC. "Some of them have incredible pride and desire to do it. We have to find a way, step by step, sooner or later to find a way back."

A bullish Mikel Arteta said Arsenal, who have not won the Premier League title since 2004, are now

firmly in the title picture after his team's thumping win at Selhurst Park.

Gabriel Jesus, who scored a hat-trick against Palace in the League Cup on Wednesday, scored two more against the same opponents and there were also goals for Kai Havertz, Gabriel Martinelli and substitute Declan Rice.

The third-placed Gunners are just three points behind Liverpool, who are in action at Tottenham today, but Arne Slot's men have played two games fewer. Chelsea are in second spot.

At one stage earlier this month Liverpool had a yawning nine-point lead at the top of the Premier League.

"We are not even halfway so we're going to try and set something. For us it's on," Arteta told Sky Sports. "I'm going to enjoy Christmas with my family because when you win it's always better," added the Spaniard, whose side have finished as Premier League runners-up for the past two seasons.

Forest won their third consecutive Premier League match to keep up their push for European football, condemning Brentford to their first home defeat this season.

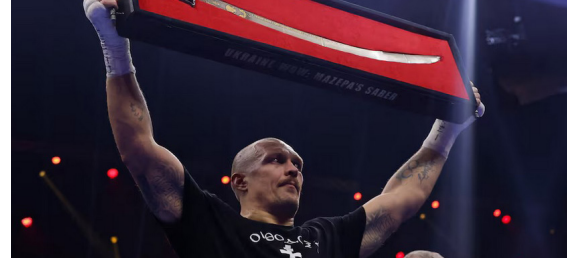
Ola Aina slotted home the opener towards the end of the first half and Anthony Elanga made it 2-0 early in the second period.

"It's about enjoying the moment," said Forest boss Nuno Espirito Santo. "It's a very hard competition. Every game is so difficult and the next one is going to be very tough."

"We're very proud of all the things we've been able to achieve, but we've achieved nothing yet."

Newcastle deepened Ipswich's plight and lifted themselves to seventh in the table with a 4-0 win at Portman Road.

## Judges Got Usyk Win Wrong, Says Vanquished Heavyweight Fury



RIYADH (Dispatches) - British heavyweight Tyson Fury said the judges made a mistake in awarding a unanimous decision win to Oleksandr Usyk of Ukraine in their clash for the WBA (Super), WBO and WBC titles at the Kingdom Arena yesterday night, claiming he should have won.

Fury fell to the second defeat of his professional career, both of which have come against Usyk, as he missed the chance to win the belts despite a much better performance in a rematch of their May bout, which he lost by split decision.

"I was quite confident. I thought I won that fight again... I thought I've won both fights. But then again, I've gone home with two losses on my record now, so there's not much I can do about it," Fury told a press conference.

"I can just fight my heart out and do the best I can, but again, I'll always believe until a day I die, I won that fight."

Fury said he had been on the front foot all night, but in truth Usyk, who gave up big advantages in terms of height, weight and reach, was the more dominant fighter for the majority of the contest as he scored another decision win.

"It is what it is. I'm not going to cry over spilled milk, it's happened now. I know boxing, I've been in it all my life. You can't change no decisions, but I'll just always feel a little bit hard done-by. Not a little bit actually — a lot," Fury said.

## Leverkusen's 5-1 Win Over Freiburg Tougher Than It Seemed



BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bayer Leverkusen manager Xabi Alonso praised his team's determination after a commanding 5-1 win over Freiburg, stressing the contest was more difficult than the scoreline suggested.

Leverkusen seemingly had little trouble cruising past Freiburg at home in the Bundesliga clash, with Patrik Schick scoring four times and Florian Wirtz adding another.

"The result may have been spectacular and Patrik scored four goals but the game was not as easy as it seemed. We had a good opponent and we had to prepare our actions intelligently," Alonso told reporters.

He praised Schick's impressive performance, noting it was the result of the team's collective effort.

"When a striker scores four goals you can't complain. Patrik also does a lot of work off the ball and when he does that well, that's why he scores the goal," he said.

"He helps the team and they make the chances for him."

## Atletico Snatch Late Win at Barca to top La Liga

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Atletico Madrid came from behind to snatch a last-gasp 2-1 victory over Barcelona and claim leadership of La Liga.

Pedri sent the Catalans ahead but second-half goals from Rodrigo De Paul and Alexander Sorloth helped Diego Simeone's side move three points clear at the top of the table, having played one match fewer than Barca.

Hansi Flick's side dominated at the Olympic stadium but Atletico clung on before claiming a 12th consecutive victory across all competitions with Sorloth's stoppage-time strike.

Barcelona started the season in superb form but have stumbled in recent weeks and have now won just one of their last seven league games.

This was their third consecutive home league defeat, their worst such run since 1987, while it was also Simeone's first ever away triumph against Barcelona in La Liga.

"It's inexplicable... we had the game in our hands and we didn't take advantage," said Barcelona defender Pau Cubarsi.

Champions Real Madrid face Sevilla y and can also move ahead of Barcelona with a victory.

"It's truly a tough defeat to take, when you don't finish a game, this is what can happen," Pedri told Movistar.

"We have the break now to reset mentally and physically."



Barcelona, missing injured teenage star Lamine Yamal, controlled the first half and suffocated Atletico with their press.

"We will fight for everything, we will fight for every point to win this (league)," insisted Flick, who said he was pleased with the performance despite the result.

"This is how we want to play in the future, so we will take this and bring it with us to next year."

Barcelona took the lead after 30 minutes with Pedri both the architect and scorer of the goal.

The Spain midfielder burst forward with the ball and fed Gavi, who

tried to turn and inadvertently nudged the ball back to the surging Pedri, who entered the box and slotted past Oblak.

Barcelona should have doubled their lead early in the second half, with Fermin Lopez denied by Oblak's legs before Raphinha hit the crossbar.

Pedri played in the Brazilian winger with a fine pass over the top and Raphinha lofted the ball over the goalkeeper but it struck the woodwork on its way down.

Moments later Atletico were level, with Marc Casado's misguided backheel clearance falling to De Paul on the edge of the area.

The in-form Argentine midfielder finished with a firm low effort into the bottom corner for his third goal in his last four league games.

In the final stages both teams tried to snatch a winner, with La Liga's top goalscorer Robert Lewandowski missing from point-blank range, although Ferran Torres appeared offside in the build-up.

At the other end Inaki Pena made a fine save to keep Pablo Barrios at bay, while Oblak saved from Raphinha after another superb Pedri ball.

## Magic Tie Franchise Record With 25-Point Comeback in Win Over Heat

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Holding visiting Miami to just eight fourth-quarter points, the Orlando Magic set a franchise record in rallying from 22 points down at the start of the final period to beat the Heat, 121-114.

Orlando, having trailed by as many as 25 points in the first half, began chipping away at the deficit with a 13-0 run to open the fourth quarter. The Magic then went on another 11-0 run to take their first lead since the early first quarter.

The runs were powered by the trio of Cole Anthony, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and Goga Bitadze, who combined to score 21 of Orlando's 37 fourth-quarter points, including the final 17 points that sealed the comeback victory. The 25-point comeback is tied for the largest in franchise history. Orlando also overcame a 25-point deficit on Nov. 8, 1989, at Cleveland.

Anthony's 35 points and nine assists off the bench were season highs. He came just two points shy of matching his career scoring high, reached in May 2021, and flirted with a triple-double, grabbing eight rebounds.

Caldwell-Pope added 24 points, half of which came on a perfect 12-of-12 shooting from the free-throw line, and Bitadze finished with a double-double, scoring 18 points on 8-of-8 shooting and grabbing 13 rebounds.

Their combined efforts buoyed an injury-strapped Orlando team,



down Paolo Banchero since October and Franz Wagner for the last two weeks and was also without Jalen Suggs on Saturday due to an ankle injury.

Miami, playing its second night of a back-to-back, was without Jimmy Butler due to a stomach ailment. Despite Butler's absence, Miami scored 76 first-half points -- a team high for one half this season -- behind the trio of Bam Adebayo, Tyler Herro and Terry Rozier.

Adebayo scored 23 points and grabbed seven rebounds, Rozier notched another 23 points off the bench and Herro recorded 22 points, six rebounds and five assists.

Dru Smith added 14 points and four steals in the loss, while Duncan Robinson finished with 10 points, four rebounds and three assists.

The win snapped a three-game losing skid for Orlando while sending Miami to its third straight defeat.

Meanwhile Scotty Pippen Jr. scored 22 points starting in place of the injured Ja Morant to lead the visiting Memphis Grizzlies to a 128-112 win over the Atlanta Hawks.

Memphis was playing without Morant because of lingering back soreness. Pippen entered the game averaging 10.2 points and turned in his second-best scoring performance of the season, only bested by a 30-point effort against Chicago on Nov. 23.

Pippen was 9-for-12 from the field and 3-for-4 on 3-point tries to go along with five rebounds, nine assists and two steals. He scored 17 in the first half to help the Grizzlies carry a 73-49 lead into the break.

Desmond Bane added 23 points, including four 3-pointers, as Memphis won its second straight game and improved to 6-1 over its last seven.



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Nick Dunlap, who became the first player to win as an amateur and a professional in the same season, has been named the PGA Tour's Rookie of the Year for the 2024 season, the U.S.-based circuit said.

The 20-year-old American was selected for the Arnold Palmer Award over Max Greyserman, Jake Knapp and Matthieu Pavon, receiving 57% of the membership vote.

In January, Dunlap triumphed at The American Express in La Quinta, California to become the first amateur to win a PGA Tour event since Phil Mickelson in 1991.

Four days after the victory, Dunlap announced he was turning professional and in July added to his breakthrough season when he won the Barracuda Championship at Tahoe Mountain Club.

Dunlap went on to qualify for his first FedExCup playoffs where he advanced to the second of three events. He placed 49th in the FedExCup and qualified for the PGA Tour's Signature Events in 2025 by virtue of finishing among the top 50.