

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Plans to Participate in a Foreign Ministerial Session Scheduled to Be Held at the United Nations Security Council in New York to Discuss the Latest Developments in West Asia, Particularly in Palestine

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Petrochemical Exports Are Expected to Reach \$13 Billion in Year to Late March, According to the CEO of National Petrochemical Company (NPC), Hassan Abbaszadeh

2 DOMESTIC

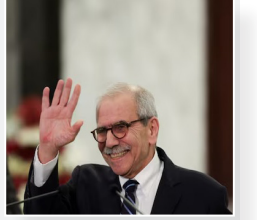


Sanctions Hinder Economic Relations Between Iran and Italy

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Lebanon's PM Designate Resigns as Member of ICJ



> SEE PAGE 3

Iran, E3 Diplomats Meet in Geneva to Discuss Removal of Sanctions



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Senior representatives of Iran and the European trio of Britain, France, and Germany (E3) have discussed the removal of illegal sanctions on Tehran and its nuclear program.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi and political directors and deputies of the European trio met in Geneva, Switzerland, on Monday.

The sides also exchanged views about issues of common interests and the ongoing situation in the region.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi was also present in the meeting.

Takht-Ravanchi is also scheduled to meet Enrique Mora, Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action Service, in Geneva on Thursday.

The Geneva meeting with the three European countries is a continuation of the talks held with the trio in September on the sidelines of the annual session of the UN General Assembly in New York and the negotiations held in Geneva in November.

The two sides have been conducting on-again, off-again talks since 2021, three years after the United States illegally and unilaterally left a historic nuclear accord between Iran and world powers under Donald Trump, returning Washington's unlawful sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

The trio then failed to live up to their promise of bringing Washington back into the deal.

Reacting to the counter-party's non-commitment to its obligations, Tehran initiated a set of retaliatory nuclear steps, including by activating more advanced centrifuges.

The country has been stepping up the measures in response to the other parties' continued refusal to uphold their obligations.

Earlier this year, the European states forwarded an anti-Iranian resolution that had been proposed by the US, to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was approved by the board.

Iran, Russia to Sign Strategic Partnership Deal on Friday



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The presidents of Iran and Russia will sign a "comprehensive strategic partnership" agreement in Moscow on Friday, the Kremlin says.

"On 17 January, Vladimir Putin will hold talks with the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Masoud Pezeshkian, who will come to Russia on an official visit," the Kremlin said on Monday.

In addition to the agreement, Pezeshkian and Putin will discuss "prospects for the further expansion of bilateral cooperation, including in trade and investment, transport and logistics and the humanitarian sphere, as well as topical issues on the regional and international agenda."

Iran and Russia, as two close and strategic allies, have over the past years deepened relations in various fields, despite heavy Western sanctions.

In 2001, Tehran and Moscow signed a long-term cooperation deal, officially known as the Treaty of the Foundation of Mutual Relations and the Principles of Cooperation. It was initially set for 10 years but was extended until 2026.

Now, the two capitals are making final arrangements for the comprehensive partnership pact, which will determine bilateral cooperation in all fields for the next 20 years.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmacil Baghaei told reporters on Monday that President Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow will take place immediately after his trip to Tajikistan.



Skies Under Iran's Command for Fatal Blow; Big Surprises in Store

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's defense minister has commended the superior stance of the capabilities of the country's Armed Forces, especially in the area of air defense and naval combat. Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh made the remarks on Monday, attending a special ceremony held to mark the joining process of as many as 1,000 advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the country's Army's Combat Organization.

"The drones that joined the Combat Organization today created such capacity in the Islamic Republic's Army that has rendered it capable of bringing the skies under its command if necessary, and administer fatal blows to the enemy," he said.

The official identified the new drones as those that are capable of landing in and taking off from the sea, and can be deployed towards smartization and contribution to the Ground Forces' operations.

He underlined remarks that have been made by Leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, in which emphasis has been made on the defense industry's duty towards aptly equipping the country's Muslim nation with their required defensive hardware.

Nasirzadeh said what the country had deployed during its various military maneuvers only comprised a fraction of the Armed Forces' capabilities.

"We have some amazing and surprising equipment in our possession, which would be deployed by our Armed Forces if need be."

The official, meanwhile, underlined the imperative nature of application of artificial intelligence technologies to drone production processes.

He considered the monumental development that witnessed integration of the huge number of drones to the Combat Organization to be the result of the very effective and favorable synergy and unity that existed between the country's defense industry and Army.

"The Army has attained considerable maturity in the area of application of drones, and has been using a manifold range of the aircraft and relevant strategies alongside special innovations across its fourfold military forces."

The official asserted that the Armed Forces would not allow any of the country's "lowly enemies" to dare resort to acts of effrontery or other forms of violation against the nation,

commending the demanding approach of the Iranian commanders that had prompted the defense industry to provide the forces with their necessary equipment.

He also pointed to underway production of First-Person View (FPV) drones by the industry.

Also joining the ceremony, the Army's Chief Commander Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi noted that such integration ceremonies as well as various military drills that have been undertaken by the Armed Forces indicated the extensive level of the forces' capacity and readiness.

He, however, identified the joining ceremony as an instance of only a fraction of the forces' capabilities, asserting that the forces were in possession of whatever they needed.

Mousavi praised the defense industry's managing to realize Ayatollah Khamenei's order towards the industry's availing itself of all the time that it had at its disposal to increasingly enhance the forces' preparedness.

"Our message to the Iranian nation is that the people's death-defying sons in the Armed Forces and the Army stand by their commitment to God, the Leader, and the nation with all their life, blood, knowledge, and power."

The commander advised that the Islamic Republic's enemies "not gamble on their chances" vis-à-vis the country by resorting to acts of aggression against it.

"This is the proud Islamic Iran, and its great people... are standing up wholeheartedly, and would not back down an iota from fulfilling their efforts to defend its Islamic Revolution's causes and national esteem," he remarked.

Mousavi defined Monday's integration process as the second time the defense industry was handing over such quantity of drones to the Combat Organization, noting that it had previously transferred hundreds of such aircraft to the body.

The new batch, though, is much more remarkable, the commander stated, adding that the defense industry had managed to hand over the aircraft six months ahead of schedule through round-the-clock dedication and endeavor due to the fact that there were new situations and field realities on the ground that had necessitated such speeding up of the process.

Mousavi noted that the country's drone capabilities and operations had significantly increased, predicting that the Army could start inaugurating its own separate Drone Force one day.

Iran Navy to Receive Unique Indigenous Zagros Combat Destroyer



TEHRAN - Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani says Zagros, a "unique" domestically-developed destroyer, is set to join the force and start sailing.

"This week, a unique military vessel called Zagros, [which is developed] with Iranian knowledge and capabilities and [enjoys] distinctive features, will be launched into the water to start operating in the region," Irani said on Monday.

The Zagros destroyer is the newest and the most state-of-the-art destroyer in the Navy and is designed for both combat and intelligence missions.

Irani also said that the country's largest military hub will be opened in the strategic area of Jask this week, adding that it encompasses specialized dock posts featuring the most advanced equipment.

Praising the quality of vessel manufacturing industry in Iran as very high, he said that "the 86th fleet of Iran's Navy, by overcoming various obstacles, managed to show the world powers the maritime capability of the Islamic Republic, and provide a platform for exploiting blue economy."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Irani appreciated the efforts of the knowledge-based companies and scientists in the field of vessel manufacturing and the development of maritime industries, saying, "With your capability, you defeated the so-called American exceptionalism in the seas and oceans and showed that those areas belong to all nations."

Referring to the presence of Iran's naval forces in international waters, he noted, "Today, the power of Iran's Navy has reached such a level that other countries seek to use our capacity and capability."

Iran's Navy has in recent years achieved self-sufficiency in manufacturing surface and sub-surface vessels. It has also increased its presence in international waters to protect naval routes and provide security for merchant vessels and tankers.

The Iranian naval forces have also staged several military drills with different countries, including Russia, China and Pakistan, over the past years to promote combat readiness.

U.S., UK, Israeli Airstrikes on Yemen Pose Grave Threat to Regional Peace



TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has condemned as "a blatant violation of international law and the UN Charter" the joint U.S.-British-Israeli airstrikes against Yemen, warning that such acts pose a grave threat to regional peace and security.

Araqchi made the remarks during a meeting with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg in the capital Tehran.

He went on to say that these joint operations are a clear violation of Yemen's territorial integrity and national sovereignty, describing them as a serious threat to regional peace and security, the consequences of which have affected all countries in the region.

The top Iranian diplomat further reaffirmed the Islamic Republic's support for the United Nations' initiatives to help improve the situation in Yemen.

Grundberg, for his part, expressed appreciation for Iran's commitment to playing an effective role in the stability and security in the region, particularly in Yemen.

He also emphasized the need for continuing consultations with Iran on regional issues, as he presented a report on the UN's latest efforts to establish peace and stability in Yemen, as well as his recent visit to Sana'a.

Earlier a senior Iranian diplomat warned of the intensification of insecurity in the West Asia region amid the US-UK airstrikes in Yemen.

Ali Asghar Khaji, a senior aide on political affairs to Iran's foreign minister, was speaking at a meeting with Grundberg. During the meeting, Khaji condemned the military aggression of the United States, Britain and the Israeli regime against Yemen's people, infrastructures and residential areas.

He hailed the Yemeni government's constructive approach in signing a peace agreement and emphasized that the U.S. military and political interference in Yemen would further complicate the situation in the Red Sea.

President: Education and Healthcare Are Not for Sale

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian, in a meeting with the Education and Training Councils, emphasized that injustice and unfairness in the education sector are absolutely unacceptable. He stated, "We are responsible, and under no circumstances should we allow such injustice and unfairness in the country's educational system and facilities. Education and healthcare cannot be handed over to the market."

Speaking at the IRIB International Conference Center, President Pezeshkian highlighted that establishing justice, following the path of righteousness, and adhering to the teachings of the Quran and the advice of Imam Ali (AS) can offer solutions to today's societal problems.

He urged that officials must not remain indifferent to existing injustices in education. Referring to the birthday of Imam Ali (AS), Pezeshkian said, "Being followers of Imam Ali requires more than just love for the Imams or raising the Quran above our heads. We must act upon the teachings and follow the righteous path to overcome the challenges facing our country."

Addressing disparities in educational infrastructure, the President questioned whether it is justifiable for some regions to lack schools or have poorly equipped ones while others enjoy top-tier educational facilities. He stressed, "Is this justice? Are we true followers of Imam Ali if we accept such disparities in educational opportunities for the children of Iran?"

Pezeshkian called for urgent reforms in the education system, recognizing the efforts of benefactors but acknowledging that the overall quality remains inadequate. He asserted, "We are to blame and must not allow injustice to prevail in our country."



Highlighting the significance of equitable education, he noted, "Children become who we teach them to be. If they turn out differently, it is our fault. We must be held accountable for failing to provide proper education."

Emphasizing that education and healthcare are human rights, not commodities, Pezeshkian said, "As Muslims, we must provide fair education and equal opportunities to all children and families. If we aim for the country's progress and to achieve the vision set by the Supreme Leader, we must act decisively. Mere slogans will not solve problems; collective effort and determination are necessary."

Recalling his tenure as the head of Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, he shared how, by relying on community participation, 700 health centers were built in six months despite limited government funding. "We achieved this not through slogans but through action and collaboration."

The President urged provincial governors to hold weekly meetings with councils, religious leaders, benefactors, and citizens to address educational shortcomings promptly. "We must not let the resolution of educational infrastructure issues take even a year. Swift action is required."

He concluded by stressing that the current state of education and healthcare does not reflect the dignity of Muslims, Shiites, and Iranians. "Iran has a rich history and civilization. We must strive to build a nation worthy of its heritage. With God's infinite mercy, knowledge, power, and creativity, we must pursue endless progress and never stop."

IRAN NEWS



Minister of Industry Leaves for Belarus for Economic Talks

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Seyed Mohammad Atabak, Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, leading an economic delegation, left Tehran for Minsk, the capital of Belarus, to participate in the 17th Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation between Iran and Belarus. Akbar Godari, Director General of the Central Asia, Caucasus, and Russia Office, announced on Monday evening that the 17th session of the Iran-Belarus Joint Economic Cooperation Commission will be held on January 15-16.

Godari stated that the meeting will be co-chaired by Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade and Belarus's Minister of Industry. He added that the commission will focus on strengthening bilateral cooperation in trade, industry, agriculture, investment, healthcare and pharmaceuticals, transportation, and fostering private sector partnerships to expand economic and commercial relations with Belarus.

Tehran and Seoul Explore Collaboration in AI, Smart Gov't, and Fiber Optics



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Minister of Communications and Information Technology emphasized the "necessity of implementing previous memorandums of understanding" between Tehran and Seoul, outlining shared cooperation opportunities in the fields of "Artificial Intelligence," "Smart Government," and "Fiber Optics."

According to the Ministry of Communications, during a meeting with Kim Jun-pyo, the South Korean Ambassador to Iran, on Monday, Seyed Sattar Hashemi stressed the importance of moving forward with past agreements, noting that if these agreements require executive action, they should be prioritized.

Hashemi highlighted the past collaboration between Tehran and Seoul in the area of Smart Government and expressed hope that this cooperation would continue following the recent disruptions. He also mentioned the Digital Economy and fiber optics projects as additional areas of cooperation between the two countries, emphasizing the desire to leverage South Korea's experience in fiber optic development for Iran's infrastructure.

The Minister also brought up the recent launch of support for Samsung's 5G phone models in Iran and requested that the South Korean ambassador explore the possibility of enabling 5G support for older Samsung models in Iran.

Hashemi further noted that Artificial Intelligence presents an excellent opportunity for joint cooperation. He stated that with the right timing, the two countries could engage in impactful and collaborative efforts to advance in this domain.

Ambassador Kim Jun-pyo acknowledged the vast potential for collaboration between Tehran and Seoul and expressed optimism about sharing the experiences of both nations. He pointed out that South Korea's advancements in e-government and smart government could be valuable for Iran, highlighting that such knowledge could be transferred.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Sanctions Hinder Economic Relations Between Iran and Italy

TEHRAN - A consultative meeting introducing the Iran-Italy Joint Chamber of Commerce was held with the participation of its board members, the president, vice president, the deputy of international affairs of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, and the European director from the international department. The session aimed to explore opportunities, challenges, and future plans to enhance economic cooperation between Iran and Italy.

At the start of the meeting, Ms. Shahabi, Secretary of the Iran-Italy Joint Chamber, introduced the chamber, stating, "The Iran-Italy Chamber is the oldest joint chamber in Europe, operating with over 5,500 registered members."

Highlighting the longstanding and strong relations between the two nations, she added, "Before the imposition of sanctions, the trade volume between Iran and Italy reached \$7.4 billion. However, sanctions have reduced this figure to \$1.4 billion. Despite this, the trade balance has consistently remained positive for Iran."

Ahmad Pourfallah, President of the Iran-Italy Joint Chamber, elaborated on future plans, saying, "For 2025, in collaboration with the International Affairs Department of the Iran Chamber and the Italian Embassy, we have outlined joint programs, including hosting and dispatching trade delegations."

He also emphasized the importance of collaboration with Italian counterparts, noting, "Our Italian counterpart, the Italy-Iran Chamber of Commerce, is managed by Dr. Zampilli, a prominent figure in the country's power plant industry."

Pourfallah reflected on past achievements, mentioning, "In 2019, we sent a

delegation of 60 Iranian companies to the Milan Expo. Numerous programs have also been implemented in recent years to develop trade relations."

He stressed the need for structural reforms and called for a review of the joint chambers' statutes. Pourfallah proposed, "We suggest forming a policy-making council comprised of elected presidents of joint chambers, and these chambers should, like other associations and provincial chambers, have a representative in the Iran Chamber of Commerce Assembly."

The president also underlined the importance of evaluating joint chambers' performance, stating, "Assessment criteria need to be reviewed to establish more precise indicators for measuring these chambers' effectiveness."

Pourfallah concluded by announcing training sessions on sanctions and FATF regulations, inviting private sector participants to attend. Samad Hassanzadeh, President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, highlighted missed investment opportunities by Italian companies, saying, "In 2018, negotiations were held for Italian investments in the hospitality sector, with plans to establish Italian hotel chains, particularly in Tabriz. Unfortunately, sanctions obstructed this project."

Additionally, Hamed Asgari, Deputy of International Affairs of the Iran Chamber, stressed the need for joint chambers to coordinate with the International Affairs Department during meetings with foreign political officials to achieve more effective outcomes.

The meeting concluded with a summary of proposals and plans, marking a significant step toward strengthening economic cooperation between Iran and Italy and improving the performance of joint chambers.

Iran Holds 0.4% Share in Global Gold Production



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Majlis Research Center, in its report titled "Analysis of the Strategic Metal Chains of the Country: Gold," examines the state of gold extraction and processing in both global and domestic contexts. According to the report, in 2022, the total global gold export value reached \$469 billion, making gold the seventh most traded product worldwide.

The report highlights that over 75% of gold supply chain exports consisted of pure gold bars. This suggests that merely having gold reserves does not inherently benefit countries in this industry. Instead, establishing appropriate structures for international banking transactions, adopting modern technologies, and achieving economies of scale in bullion production are crucial for effectively entering global gold markets.

The report also points out that Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates are the largest gold importers worldwide. Given that these countries are major producers of pure gold bullion but not primary gold mining nations, it is evident that they import unrefined gold and export refined bullion.

Additionally, the report notes that five countries—Australia, Russia, South Africa, the United States, and China—collectively hold more than half of the world's gold reserves. Iran, situated on the gold mineralization belt (porphyry deposits), has significant potential to increase its gold production capacity. Iran's gold reserves are estimated at around 800 tons, placing the country 18th globally, with approximately 1% of global reserves. In 2023, Iran's gold ore production reached 14 tons, accounting for just 0.4% of global mine production. This figure is notably low compared to other countries with similar geological structures, which report much higher bullion production.

The report identifies critical challenges hindering the development of Iran's upstream gold production. It explains that the use of cyanide and cyanide ions in the gold production chain poses environmental risks. Consequently, environmental protection agencies in Iran oppose granting exploration licenses for gold due to pollution concerns from cyanide infiltration (high concentrations of cyanide, thiocyanate, and complex cyanide-metal compounds in gold processing wastewater). However, the report suggests that various methods can be employed to neutralize and detoxify cyanide solutions in wastewater to prevent environmental and groundwater contamination.

Iran-Turkey Agricultural Trade Hits \$2.5b

TEHRAN - Mohammad Ali Rezaei, Chairman of the Agriculture Commission at Iran's Chamber of Commerce, discussed the outcomes of the recent visit by Iran's Minister of Agriculture, who led an economic delegation to Turkey.

Rezaei stated that 180 Iranian businesspeople, active in various sectors such as agriculture, livestock, poultry, veterinary vaccines, fertilizers, and pesticides, accompanied the minister. During the trip, they engaged in discussions with Turkish counterparts on joint cooperation opportunities, particularly in agricultural machinery technology and seed production. Rezaei highlighted that Turkey, not being under sanctions, can serve as a conduit for introducing agricultural technology and machinery to Iran, which faces restrictions due to sanctions.

He added that out of the \$15 billion trade volume between Iran and Turkey, \$2.5 billion is dedicated to the agricultural sector. Iran's agricultural exports to Turkey have increased during the first nine months of the Iranian year 1403 (March-December 2024) compared to the same period last year. With the signing of the eighth strategic agricultural cooperation agreement during this event, both countries have outlined a five-year plan to expand agricultural trade. It is projected that total trade between Iran and Turkey could reach \$30 billion within five years, with agricultural products accounting for \$5 billion.

Rezaei also noted that both sides discussed resolving customs issues, particularly challenges at the Bazargan customs terminal and fuel tax concerns for truck drivers.

He further mentioned that joint investment in education and research for producing improved seeds and seedlings was another focus of the event. If successful, this collaboration could enable Iran to domestically produce essential seeds, especially varieties currently unavailable in the country.

Rezaei emphasized the shared challenges faced by Iran and Turkey in agriculture, such as climate change and drought. The discussions covered agricultural mechanization, modern irrigation methods, greenhouse development, fisheries and aquaculture, production and exchange of veterinary vaccines, fertilizers, and pesticides.

Additionally, talks included building infrastructure to boost agricultural trade, such as storage facilities, transportation, processing industries, information networks, strengthening integrated agricultural data systems, and enhancing agricultural extension services through ICT.

When asked if Turkey could become a new source for supplying livestock and poultry feed to Iran, Rezaei responded that it depends on Turkey's pricing and quality of feed products, as well as the state of political and economic relations between the two countries. He also pointed out that other countries bordering the Caspian Sea—such as



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan—could also serve as sources for these supplies.

Meanwhile a member of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce board stated that at the conclusion of the 8th Strategic Agriculture Committee meeting between Iran and Turkey, held in Ankara, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the Iran Feed Industry Association and the Turkish Feed Association. This agreement focuses on collaboration in the fields of livestock, poultry, and

aquaculture feed.

Majid Movahed Ghadiri added that this MoU was signed in the presence of Iran's Minister of Agriculture Jihad, Alireza Noori Ghezleji, and Turkey's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Ibrahim Yumakli, by private sector representatives from both countries.

He announced that under this agreement, both countries expressed readiness to support joint investments in the feed industry, create opportunities for mutual marketing development, and exchange information on feed safety, animal nutrition, and sustainable development.

Appreciating the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad in organizing this event, Ghadiri mentioned that Turkey's major needs in this industry relate to aquaculture feed and its raw materials, creating a significant opportunity for Iranian stakeholders.

He further stated that senior economic officials from Iran and Turkey emphasized the need for planning to increase bilateral trade volume to \$30 billion, specifically aiming for \$5 billion in the agricultural sector within five years. Fortunately, agricultural cooperation between the two countries is at its highest level.

Ghadiri noted that the first agricultural trade conference between the two countries was held in 2016. The recent visit of Iran's agricultural delegation, led by the Minister of Agriculture Jihad to Ankara, reflects both sides' serious intention to expand cooperation. In 2023, bilateral trade reached approximately \$5.5 billion, with about 16.6% dedicated to agricultural products. Additionally, agricultural trade in the first ten months of 2024 grew by 30%, reaching \$854 million.

The President of Iran's Feed Industry Association emphasized that agricultural trade between the two countries has nearly doubled since the first joint agricultural committee in 2016. He highlighted the importance of utilizing Turkey's successful experience in agricultural trade, as Turkey exports over 700 agricultural products to 200 countries worldwide.

He further stated that due to their extensive experience in producing livestock, poultry, and aquaculture feed, Iran and Turkey have significant potential for expanded cooperation. The recent MoU aims to exchange expertise, transfer knowledge, pursue joint investments, market in target export markets, and support each other in various forums.

Iranian Companies Poised for Growth in Tajikistan's Market



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Iran Chamber of Commerce is set to lead a business delegation to Tajikistan, headed by the Chamber's President. This visit coincides with the Iranian President's official trip to the country.

Given the collaborative potential between Iran and Tajikistan, the delegation will include professionals from various sectors such as technical and engineering services, construction, food industries, agriculture, tourism, mining, mineral industries, and pharmaceuticals.

A member of the Iran Chamber of Commerce highlighted Tajikistan's high capacity for attracting investments in technical and engineering services. "Although Tajikistan may not be a large market, its cultural and linguistic similarities with Iran make it highly conducive for Iranian trade and investment," said Soheil Al-Rasoul in an interview with Iran Chamber Online.

Al-Rasoul praised the strong track record of Iranian engineering companies, contractors, and consulting engineers in executing projects in Tajikistan. He noted that Iran has over 60,000 active companies in construction, road building, and infrastructure industries, many of which are well-positioned to invest in Tajikistan. Given Tajikistan's aging infrastructure, Iranian companies can offer competitive pricing in this market.

He further explained that due to Iran's struggling development budget over the past decade, boosting exports can prevent the migration of skilled labor, generate foreign currency, and strengthen economic enterprises.

Al-Rasoul highlighted the success of prominent Iranian contracting companies in Tajikistan, noting that a leading Iranian firm—recognized multiple times as a top exporter—is currently executing joint projects with Italian and French partners in the country.

According to Al-Rasoul, three key advantages position Iranian companies ahead of their competitors in Tajikistan: a proven track record, geographical proximity, and shared cultural values.

He also pointed out challenges in the construction and engineering services sector, stating that Iranian companies often face barriers entering international tenders, which are limited in number. Additionally, Iranian firms struggle with securing bank guarantees for projects.

Al-Rasoul emphasized that exporting engineering services and undertaking construction projects abroad heavily depend on strengthened political relations and government diplomacy. He cited Turkey's successful regional presence as a result of its government's political engagement and presidential advocacy.

Carpet Exports Plunge From \$2b to \$40m Amid Changing European Preferences



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The export of Iranian handmade carpets has seen a dramatic decline, dropping from \$2.1 billion in 1994 to just \$40 million annually.

Morteza Haji Aghamiri, head of the Carpet, Art, and Handicrafts Commission at the Iran Chamber of Commerce, cited changing European tastes and internal economic challenges as key factors behind this sharp decrease.

Germany, historically one of the main markets for Iranian carpets, remains among the top five destinations despite the overall downturn. Aghamiri noted that while Iranian carpets are still sold in France, the UK, Italy, and non-European markets like the UAE, the new generation in Europe views carpets as short-term, replaceable items rather than luxury goods, reducing their willingness to invest in high-quality Iranian rugs.

As a result, more affordable Turkish and Indian carpets that align with modern preferences have overtaken Iranian products in European markets. Additionally, domestic currency policies and international sanctions, particularly the U.S. ban on Iranian carpets, have further strained the industry, limiting Iran's market reach to just 56% of the global carpet market.

Aghamiri also highlighted Japan as a promising market and emphasized the importance of participating in Japan's Expo. However, he criticized the management of such events, arguing that the current overseeing body lacks the proper qualifications, as expos are culturally and socially driven, making the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade an unsuitable organizer.

Lebanon's PM Designate Resigns as Member of ICJ

AMSTERDAM (Dispatches) - Nawaf Salam, who has been designated as the new Prime Minister of Lebanon, has resigned as a member of the International Court of Justice, said the ICJ on Tuesday.

Salam's term as head of the ICJ had been due to end in early February 2027.

Earlier this week, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun summoned Salam to designate him prime minister after most lawmakers had nominated him, dealing a big blow to Hezbollah, which accused opponents of seeking to exclude it.



The Role of Private Insurance in Healthcare Across the Middle East

Dr. Vahid Nowbahar, MD, Member of the International Society for Evolution, Medicine, and Public Health (ISEMPH)

The Middle East is evolving into a hub of dynamic healthcare solutions, driven by its diverse demographics, rapid economic growth, and increasing consumer awareness. In this transformation, private healthcare insurance has emerged as a vital player. While traditionally reliant on state-funded healthcare systems offering free or subsidized care, many Middle Eastern countries are now shifting towards a hybrid model. This model balances public healthcare with private insurance, providing individuals with enhanced access to quality medical services and mitigating financial pressures associated with treatment costs.

The Evolution of Private Healthcare Insurance in the Middle East: A Historical Perspective

Historically, public healthcare systems in the Middle East were comprehensive and government-funded. Nations like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE invested heavily in building robust infrastructures to ensure their citizens received free or highly subsidized medical care. Public facilities catered to a broad range of healthcare needs without placing a financial burden on the population.

As the healthcare systems in the Middle East evolved, they faced significant challenges due to demographic, economic, and healthcare shifts. Rapid population growth, driven by high birth rates and an influx of expatriates, strained public healthcare resources. Additionally, the rising prevalence of chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart conditions, exacerbated by sedentary lifestyles and poor dietary habits, escalated the demand for long-term and expensive treatments. These pressures led to underfunding, outdated infrastructure, and a reliance on expatriate healthcare workers, ultimately impacting the quality and sustainability of public healthcare services.

The Need for Private Healthcare Insurance

These systemic pressures underscored the need for complementary solutions. Private healthcare insurance emerged as a critical alternative, addressing gaps in accessibility, quality, and efficiency. With private insurance, patients gained access to quicker treatments, specialized care, and modern medical technologies often unavailable in state-run facilities. This shift marked a pivotal transformation in the region's healthcare framework.

Government-Driven Initiatives and Mandates

Recognizing the potential of private insurance to alleviate pressures on public systems, governments across the Middle East introduced regulations to promote its adoption. Some nations even mandated private health insurance, reshaping the healthcare landscape.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) led the charge in implementing comprehensive health insurance reforms. In Abu Dhabi, mandatory health insurance was introduced in 2008, requiring coverage for both nationals and expatriates. Dubai followed suit in 2014, extending coverage requirements to all residents.

Saudi Arabia adopted a slightly different approach. The government mandated employers to provide health insurance to employees and their dependents. While not yet universal, this policy significantly increased private insurance enrollment. Similarly, Qatar introduced regulations targeting expatriates, requiring them to obtain private insurance as part of their residency.

Market Trends and Consumer Preferences

Beyond government mandates, market forces have also driven the growth of private healthcare insurance. A combination of increased consumer awareness, changing demographics, and evolving expectations has shaped the industry.

Rising Awareness and Affordability

As people become more informed about the financial risks of medical emergencies, there is a growing appreciation for the security offered by private health insurance. Comprehensive plans covering advanced treatments, critical illnesses, and international care have become particularly popular among the middle and upper classes.

Expatriate-Driven Growth

Expatriates form a significant portion of the population in countries such as the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait. These individuals, often ineligible for government-subsidized care, rely heavily on private insurance. Tailored insurance plans offering international coverage cater to their unique needs, further boosting market demand.

Demand for Premium Healthcare Services

Affluent populations in the Persian Gulf region are increasingly seeking specialized care and access to internationally accredited hospitals. Treatments using cutting-edge medical technologies, including minimally invasive surgeries and advanced diagnostics, are in high demand.

Private Insurance's Role in Strengthening Healthcare Systems

Private insurance plays a critical role in complementing public healthcare systems across the Middle East. By alleviating the burden on state-run facilities, it enables governments to focus resources on providing essential care to underserved populations.

Enhancing Resource Allocation

The coexistence of public and private systems ensures a more efficient allocation of healthcare resources. Public hospitals can concentrate on addressing basic and emergency care needs, while private insurers provide a pathway for individuals seeking faster, more specialized treatments. This synergy creates a balanced healthcare ecosystem that benefits all stakeholders.

Filling Service Gaps



In nations like the UAE and Qatar, private health insurance has effectively filled gaps in the healthcare system. It offers comprehensive coverage while reducing pressure on public facilities, particularly for non-urgent cases.

Challenges for Private Healthcare Insurance in the Middle East

Cost Pressures: Rising healthcare expenses from inflation, advanced technology, and specialized treatments challenge insurers to manage costs while keeping premiums competitive.

Regulatory Complexity: Diverse and inconsistent regulations across the region complicate operations and demand significant resources for compliance.

Cultural and Socioeconomic Barriers: Cultural diversity requires tailored plans, while affordability issues restrict access for lower-income groups, limiting market reach.

The Future of Private Healthcare Insurance in the Middle East

The future of private healthcare insurance in the Middle East is poised for continued evolution, shaped by advancements in technology, changing demographics, and growing consumer expectations.

Digital Transformation

Technological innovation is revolutionizing the insurance sector. Telemedicine, wearable health devices, and AI-driven analytics are enabling insurers to offer personalized, cost-effective solutions. These tools also enhance fraud detection and streamline claims processing, improving efficiency across the board.

Focus on Preventive Care

As awareness of lifestyle-related health issues grows, insurers are incorporating wellness programs into their offerings. Incentives for healthy behaviors, such as regular exercise and balanced diets, are becoming a common feature of modern insurance plans.

Expansion of Medical Tourism

The Middle East, particularly the UAE, is emerging as a hub for medical tourism. Insurers are tapping into this trend by offering plans that cover international treatments, catering to both local residents and inbound medical tourists.

Healthcare Insurance Provided by Private Insurance Companies in Iran

Healthcare insurance plays a pivotal role in ensuring access to medical services, protecting individuals and families from financial hardships due to health-related expenses. In Iran, the healthcare system has traditionally been heavily reliant on government-funded programs. However, with increasing demands for specialized medical services, economic challenges, and evolving consumer expectations, private health insurance companies have emerged as key contributors to the nation's healthcare landscape.

Private insurance companies in Iran provide supplementary or comprehensive coverage to bridge gaps in public healthcare. These organizations offer plans tailored to diverse needs, including individuals, families, expatriates, and corporate groups. This article explores the role of private insurance companies in Iran's healthcare system, their contributions, challenges, and the future of private healthcare insurance in the country.

The role of private insurance in Iran's healthcare system is pivotal, offering complementary services to bridge the gaps left by public healthcare. While the public system provides basic and essential medical services, private insurers expand access to specialized and elective treatments, such as advanced diagnostics, outpatient procedures, and private hospital care. This dual system ensures that individuals can access a broader range of healthcare options.

Private insurance plans cater to diverse needs, offering flexibility and comprehensive coverage. For individuals and families, these plans typically cover essential services like doctor visits, surgeries, maternity care, and chronic disease management. For corporate clients, private insurers provide tailored health benefits for employees and their families, enhancing workforce well-being. Additionally, expatriates residing in Iran benefit from plans that include both local and international healthcare coverage, addressing their unique requirements.

The contributions of private insurance extend beyond coverage options. By facilitating access to advanced surgeries, mental health services, and rehabilitation programs, private insurers ensure that policyholders receive holistic care. Moreover, they play a critical role in reducing waiting times, allowing patients to receive prompt treatment at private facilities. Partnerships with leading private healthcare providers also enhance the quality of services, giving policyholders

access to cutting-edge technologies and expert care.

Healthcare Insurance Provided by TejaratNo Insurance Company in Iran

In Iran's complex and ever-evolving healthcare landscape, TejaratNo Insurance Company has emerged as a prominent leader in the private insurance sector. Known for its diverse and comprehensive health coverage plans, the company plays a pivotal role in meeting the healthcare needs of millions of Iranians. By addressing systemic challenges and embracing innovation, TejaratNo has positioned itself as a key player in shaping the future of healthcare insurance in Iran. This exploration highlights the company's journey, challenges, innovative strategies, and its vision for the future.

TejaratNo Insurance Company has consistently prioritized innovation, flexibility, and customer satisfaction. Over the years, the company has grown from a modest insurer to a leader in the industry, setting benchmarks for quality and reliability. TejaratNo's contribution to Iran's healthcare insurance market is noteworthy. It has introduced tailored health plans designed to cater to various demographics, including individuals, families, and specialized groups such as expatriates and high-risk populations. These plans go beyond basic medical coverage to include preventive care, wellness initiatives, and partnerships with healthcare providers to ensure affordability and access.

Innovative Strategies Employed by TejaratNo

To navigate these challenges and maintain its competitive edge, TejaratNo has adopted a range of innovative strategies:

Leveraging Technology and Digital Solutions

TejaratNo recognizes the transformative power of technology in modern healthcare. By integrating digital tools into its operations, the company has enhanced service delivery and customer engagement.

- **Mobile Applications:** TejaratNo's user-friendly mobile app called "BENO" allows easy access to all healthcare and treatment centers. It also enables users to record medical expenses online, facilitating faster reimbursements.

- **Digital Claims Processing:** Streamlined digital processes ensure faster claim settlements, improving customer satisfaction and operational efficiency.

Tailored Healthcare Plans

TejaratNo's strength lies in its ability to design flexible and customized health insurance products.

- **Individual Plans:** Affordable options for single policyholders seeking essential coverage.

- **Family Plans:** Comprehensive packages that cater to the diverse needs of families, including maternity care and pediatric services.

- **High-Risk Groups:** Specialized plans for individuals with chronic illnesses or high-risk occupations, ensuring they receive the care they need without prohibitive costs.

- **Expatriate Plans:** Tailored insurance solutions for expatriates, offering both local and international coverage.

Strategic Partnerships with Healthcare Providers

To deliver high-quality and affordable care, TejaratNo collaborates with a number of 10,000 network of hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centers, laboratories and pharmacies across Iran.

- **Cost Negotiations:** By negotiating favorable rates with healthcare providers, the company ensures affordable treatment options for its policyholders.

- **Exclusive Agreements:** Partnerships with top-tier hospitals and clinics enable access to advanced medical treatments, diagnostic facilities, and specialized care.

- **Pharmacy Integration:** Collaborations with pharmacies allow for seamless access to medications at discounted rates.

Consumer-Centric Models

TejaratNo places a strong emphasis on understanding and adapting to consumer preferences. Its commitment to customer satisfaction is reflected in its focus on preventive care, wellness initiatives, and enhanced engagement. Just in a period of 210 days, total medical services provided for policyholders are more than one million which 14,900 ones provided with hospitalized policyholders.

Preventive Care Programs

Recognizing the importance of early intervention, TejaratNo offers preventive care services as part of its health plans. These programs include routine health check-ups, vaccination drives, and screenings for chronic conditions. By focusing on prevention, the company helps reduce long-term healthcare costs for both itself and its policyholders.

Wellness Initiatives

TejaratNo actively promotes healthy lifestyles through wellness programs. Policyholders are incentivized to adopt healthier habits, such as regular exercise, balanced diets, and stress management practices. Some plans even offer rewards for meeting wellness goals, fostering a culture of proactive health management.

Customer Engagement

Understanding that personalized service is key to customer loyalty, TejaratNo invests in engaging with its clients through multiple channels.

- **24/7 Support:** Round-the-clock customer service ensures policyholders receive assistance whenever they need it.

- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Regular surveys and feedback sessions help the company refine its offerings to better meet consumer needs.

- **Education Campaigns:** TejaratNo runs awareness campaigns to educate the public about the benefits of private health insurance and the specifics of its plans.

Future of TejaratNo Healthcare Insurance

TejaratNo aims to lead Iran's healthcare insurance market through:

- **AI Integration:** Enhancing risk assessment, policy personalization, and cost management.

- **Wellness Focus:** Expanding preventive care, wearable health integration, and mental health services.

- **Medical Tourism Expansion:** Offering specialized plans for international patients.

By embracing innovation and consumer-centric strategies, TejaratNo is set to be as a leader in Iran's healthcare insurance, ensuring access and security for its policyholders.



Djokovic Survives Wobble to Launch Bid for Record 25th Slam Crown

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic survived a first-set scare on Monday to begin his quest for an 11th Australian Open title and record 25th Grand Slam crown in shaky fashion. The 37-year-old was flat-footed and out of ideas early on against teenage American wildcard Nishesh Basavareddy, who was making his Grand Slam main draw debut. The 19-year-old stunned Djokovic by winning the first set in front of a shocked Melbourne Park crowd. But the Serbian slowly began to get his measure, battling through 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 with new coach Andy Murray sitting quietly courtside on Rod Laver Arena in one of the newly introduced "coaching pods". The win put Djokovic into the second round in Melbourne for an 18th consecutive year. "At the end it was great but I think he was the better player for a set-and-a-half," said seventh seed Djokovic. "He deserves every bit of applause that he got. "These kind of matchups are always tricky, dangerous when you are playing someone who has nothing to lose. He's a very complete player." The veteran appeared unsure how to handle the athletic youngster at first. At 3-3 in the first set Djokovic left a lob that instead landed in to give his opponent three break points and the American converted with a crosscourt backhand, to gasps from the crowd. With Djokovic spraying shots long and wide, Basavareddy wrapped up a set in which the Serb made 11 unforced errors and failed to convert any of the three break points he worked. The shock of going behind on a court he has long owned woke up Djokovic and he clawed back in the second set, earning his first break to go 5-3 ahead and serving out to level the match, roaring in elation. The American needed treatment on his left leg at the changeover and wasn't the same player afterwards as Djokovic twisted the knife and raced to victory. Djokovic hired long-time rival Murray, who retired last year, to help him get back to winning ways after

a lean 2024 where he failed to collect a major for the first time since 2017. While he earned Olympic gold, the Slams were dominated by Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz. Djokovic is adamant he can still compete with the world's best but his struggles against a player ranked 107 did little to dispel any doubts. He will next play Portuguese qualifier Jaime Faria in his bid to win one more Slam and surpass Margaret Court's 24 as the best ever. Should he go all the way, it will be his 100th career title, just the third man in the Open era to reach the milestone behind Jimmy Connors (109) and Roger Federer (103). Meanwhile Carlos Alcaraz launched his bid for a first Australian Open crown by dismantling Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko in straight sets. Spain's Alcaraz, playing his first match of the season, suffered a couple of hairy moments in Melbourne before easing through 6-1, 7-5, 6-1. "There is no secret, I work, I try to be better every day," said Alcaraz, who is bidding to complete a career Grand Slam of all four majors aged just 21. "I am trying to be a better person and player every day," added the Spaniard, who faces Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka in the second round. The four-time major champion and world number three Alcaraz romped through the first set in barely half an hour in a signal of intent. The 77th-ranked Shevchenko put up a much sterner fight in the second set. Alcaraz got the break of serve to take a 3-1 lead only for the Kazakh to break back and then hold for 3-3. The emboldened 24-year-old then stunned the Melbourne crowd by breaking the third seed to edge ahead.



Man Utd win FA Cup Third Round Shootout at Arsenal

LONDON (Dispatches) - Ten-man FA Cup holders Manchester United dispatched Arsenal in a third-round thriller decided by a penalty shootout, while Tottenham Hotspur survived a major scare against non-league side Tamworth. Premier League teams Newcastle United, Ipswich Town, Crystal Palace and Southampton also punched their tickets to the fourth round with victories, while fourth-tier Doncaster Rovers advanced after a shootout. Joshua Zirkzee struck the winning penalty for 10-man Manchester United after their hectic tie finished 1-1 after extra time at the Emirates Stadium. Arsenal's Kai Havertz was the only one of the first four penalty takers to miss, denied by a brilliant stop from Altay Bayindir, before Zirkzee - who was booed off the pitch in United's 2-0 loss to Newcastle last month - stepped up to win the shootout 5-3. "I just want to help this great team," second-choice goalkeeper Bayindir told the BBC. "I want to make everyone happy for this great club ... if you are not playing it doesn't matter. "You have to be ready every minute, every second - if you are a Man Utd player you have to be ready always." United took the lead in the 52nd minute through Bruno Fernandes' curling effort from just inside the box after a great run by Alejandro Garnacho. The game turned on its head 10 minutes later though, as United's Diogo Dalot received a second yellow card for a reckless tackle on Mikel Merino. Two minutes later, Bayindir's poor attempted punch fell at the feet of Gabriel, whose shot took a wicked deflection off Matthijs de Ligt and in to put the Gunners in charge of the tie. Arsenal were awarded a questionable penalty after Havertz went down under minimal contact from Harry Maguire. But, after a brief melee which saw Maguire, Havertz and Gabriel booked, Bayindir produced a superb save from Arsenal captain Martin Odegaard in the 72nd minute.

Lakers Lose, Clippers Win in Return to Action

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Devin Vassell, Stephon Castle and Victor Wembanyama each scored 23 points as the visiting San Antonio Spurs ended a three-game losing streak with a 126-102 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Monday in the return to play for both teams. The Lakers had two home games postponed in the past week, including a game against the Spurs scheduled for Saturday, as a safety precaution because of deadly wildfires in the Los Angeles area. The Spurs defeated the Lakers for the first time in three games between the teams this season, outscoring Los Angeles 73-40 in the second half. Anthony Davis amassed 30 points and 13 rebounds and LeBron James added 18 points and eight assists as Lakers lost their third consecutive game, all to Texas teams. Los Angeles fell at Houston and at Dallas on its recent road trip. Austin Reaves scored 12 points and dished out eight assists for Los Angeles, which led by as many as 11 points in the third quarter before falling apart over the final 16 minutes of the game. Clippers 109, Heat 98: Norman Powell scored 29 points while James Harden and Ivica Zubac chalked up double-doubles as Los



Angeles overturned an early 13-point deficit to beat Miami in Inglewood, Calif., in LA's first game since last Wednesday because of the wildfires. Harden had 26 points with 11 assists while hitting 6 of 10 3-point attempts, and Zubac threw down seven dunks en route to 21 points and 20 rebounds for the Clippers, whose home game against the

Charlotte Hornets scheduled for last Saturday was postponed. The Heat, whose three-game winning streak (all on the road) came to an end, received 32 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists from Tyler Herro plus 19 points and 13 boards from Kel'el Ware. Timberwolves 120, Wizards 106: Anthony Edwards took control in the fourth quarter, scoring 20 of his game-high 41 points, and Minnesota sent host Washington to its seventh consecutive loss. Minnesota found itself in a back-and-forth contest for most of the way with Washington, which was playing its second game of a back-to-back set. The Wizards dropped their previous two games by 74 combined points, but they were competitive with the Timberwolves until a pivotal late stretch. With Minnesota up 88-86, Edwards connected on a 3-pointer with 8:42 remaining. But Washington's Carlton Carrington answered with one of his own 18 seconds later. The Wizards did not score again for 2:26, however, as Minnesota went on a decisive 11-0 run.



Belgian GP to Stay on F1 Calendar in Four of Six Years to 2031

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - The Belgian Grand Prix at Spa-Francorchamps will drop off the Formula One calendar in 2028 and 2030 as part of a contract extension announced on Wednesday to host four races in the six years to 2031. Liberty Media-owned Formula One said the race would be held in the 2026, 2027, 2029 and 2031 seasons. This year's grand prix is already confirmed for July 27 and will also feature a Saturday sprint. The alternate venue for 2028 and 2030 has yet to be confirmed, with potential candidates elsewhere in Europe as the sport introduces a rotational system to a 24-race format. Imola in Italy and the current Spanish Grand Prix circuit outside Barcelona both face uncertain futures, with Madrid scheduled to host a race from 2026 to 2035. Imola's contract expires in 2026, with Italy's main race at Monza confirmed until at least 2031. The Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort has already decided to drop off the calendar after 2026 but France, which last had a grand prix in 2022, and Germany, absent since 2020, could re-enter the picture. Formula One is keen to return to Africa for the first time since 1993, with interest in both Rwanda and South Africa, and there has also been talk of further expansion in Asia. Belgium featured in the first Formula One world championship season in 1950 and the Spa circuit ranks with Monaco, Monza and Silverstone among the sport's most historic venues. Spa's contract had been due to expire after this year's race. First used in 1921, the circuit has hosted 57 grands prix and is the longest on the calendar with its famed plunge down to Eau Rouge/Raidillon and the long Kemmel straight. "Spa-Francorchamps is rightly lauded by drivers and fans alike as one of the finest racetracks in the world and it has played host to some incredible moments over its many seasons in Formula One," said F1 chief executive Stefano Domenicali in a statement. "In recent years it has undergone significant work to improve the facility and overall fan experience." New grandstands have been built in recent years at a circuit that had an attendance of 380,000 over the three day weekend last season.

Rams, Behind 9 Sacks and Defensive TD, Shut Down Vikings

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Matthew Stafford threw two first-half touchdown passes and the Los Angeles Rams' defense had nine sacks to tie the NFL playoff record in a 27-9 wild-card-round victory over the Minnesota Vikings on Monday in a game relocated to Glendale, Ariz. The Rams' home game originally was scheduled for Inglewood, Calif., before the venue was changed for public safety purposes because of deadly wildfires in the Los Angeles area over the past week. "With everything that has gone on with our community and everything these guys have gone through, I thought they represented the city the right way," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "You talk about sports offering a platform for people to come together and offer a little bit of temporary relief, and I thought the way our team competed tonight is what it looked like to stay connected, to stay together." Linebacker Jared Verse returned a fumble 57 yards for a touchdown and Kobie Turner had two sacks as the Rams came out on top in a playoff game for the first time since winning Super Bowl LVI at the end of the 2021 season. Stafford completed 19 of 27 passes for 209 yards and Kyren Williams and Davis Allen each caught a touchdown pass as Los Angeles defeated Minnesota for the second time this season. Williams ran for 76 yards on 16 carries. "The offense was able to go out there and get an early lead and our defense went crazy, was attacking the quarterback, making big plays, scoring on defense and doing a great job getting us the ball back,"



Stafford said. The fourth-seeded Rams will be on the road to face the second-seeded Philadelphia Eagles in an NFC divisional-round game on Sunday. Sam Darnold finished 25-of-40 passing for 245 yards with one touchdown and one interception for the fifth-seeded Vikings, who were the first wild-card team to win 14 games in the regular season. T.J. Hockenson caught five passes for 64 yards and a score for Minnesota, while Justin Jefferson had five receptions for 58 yards. "Way too many negatives on offense, missed opportunities and things we can do better," Vikings coach Kevin O'Connell said. "That's what we're going to go back and do. But it's still very fresh for our team. ... It hurts, but we have to use this as fuel moving forward but at the same time understand the special group we have and make sure we're aware of how we move forward to build upon this team into next year." The Rams started quickly, taking the opening drive of the game 70 yards in seven plays, with Williams scoring on a 5-yard pass from Stafford. After a three-and-out by Minnesota, Los Angeles added a 34-yard field goal from Joshua Karty on its second possession for a 10-0 lead. The Vikings answered with a 34-yard field goal from Will Reichard to pull within 10-3 early in the second quarter. Verse's fumble return for a score came after a sack and forced fumble from Ahkello Witherspoon to give the Rams a 17-3 lead with 4:35 remaining in the first half.