

Iraq Has Issued an Official Order Banning All Activities of Anti-Iran Militant Groups on Its Soil, Particularly in the Kurdistan Region, in a Move Aimed at Strengthening Bilateral Ties With the Islamic Republic

IRAN NEWS

President Masoud Pezeshkian Emphasized the Need for Development Plans in Iran to Be Rooted in Accurate and Up-to-Date Data, Lamenting the Current Lack of Reliable Statistics on the Capacities

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Petrochemical Output Capacity in Iran to Reach 105m Tons by March 2026

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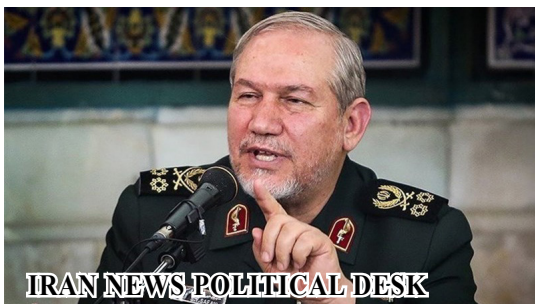
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EU Prepares New Sanctions on Russia Over Ukraine War

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Trump Will Lead to America's Decline



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a public statement, Major General Yahya Safavi, senior advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Armed Forces, asserted that former U.S. President Donald Trump's approach to governance and foreign policy is accelerating the decline of the United States.

Speaking at a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the Sayyid al-Shuhada military operation in Fakkah, Safavi described Trump as a "disruptive and law-defying figure" whose actions have destabilized both domestic and international order.

"Trump's confrontational foreign policy has led to tensions with many countries," Safavi said. "His unconventional statements and actions have not only disturbed internal affairs in the U.S. but have also shaken the foundations of global stability. This trajectory may very well weaken America's standing in the world."

Safavi also praised the leadership of Iran's Supreme Leader, highlighting his qualities of wisdom, courage, kindness, rationality, and modesty—traits which he said are rare among world leaders such as presidents, kings, and emirs.

He went on to explain that events like the commemorative ceremony aim to pass on the culture of "jihad and resistance" to younger generations, lamenting that unlike the martyrs who sacrificed themselves for a higher cause, many today are driven by self-interest.

Reflecting on the Iran-Iraq War, Safavi emphasized the unity between Iran's army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Basij militia. "Just as we followed Imam Khomeini during wartime, we must now support the Supreme Leader, who has led the revolution for 36 years," he stated. "No matter which administration takes office, we must support it. Our enemies are weaker than before, and we are stronger than ever."

Senior Official Urges Serious Dialogue With Persian Gulf States Amid Israel's Threats

خليج فارس در پرتو تحولات منطقه



اردیبهشت ۱۴۰۴

TEHRAN (PressTV) - An Iranian diplomat has warned against Israel's plot to dominate the Persian Gulf region, saying the Islamic Republic and the littoral states in this strategic area need to engage in "serious" dialogue.

Kamal Kharrazi, the head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, made the remarks in an address to a conference on the Persian Gulf and the regional and international developments in Tehran on Thursday.

"In the light of the rationality and maturity developed by the countries in the region, regional dialogue needs to be established between Iran and the Arab countries, and Iran seeks such talks," Kharrazi said.

He added that the Islamic Republic's strategic policy is to utilize "soft power," explaining that such a policy includes the promotion of economic cooperation with regional countries.

The senior Iranian official emphasized that Iran, Iraq and the six Persian Gulf littoral states can take steps towards the development of the region in security, economic and cultural fields with no foreign interference.

Kharrazi, who is also a senior advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, said cooperation between Iran and the Persian Gulf littoral states covers issues far beyond the economic ones.

Iran Will Never Accept Threats, Pressure in Talks With U.S.

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Ministry says the country will never accept approaches based on threats and pressure in the indirect talks with the United States, as Washington imposed new sanctions on Tehran.

In a statement on Friday, the ministry once again affirmed Iran's commitment to the path of diplomacy and its readiness to continue the negotiations with the United States.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran... will never tolerate, under any circumstances, the approaches based on threats and pressure, which are all in breach of the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law," it said.

Such approaches have been designed to harm Iran's national interests and violate the human rights of the Iranian people, it added.

The warning came after the US State Department sanctioned seven entities in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Iran for trading Iranian petroleum and petrochemical products.

The sanctions are the latest round imposed by the administration of President Donald Trump on Iran since February, when he reimposed his so-called maximum pressure campaign on Tehran.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry strongly condemned continued unlawful sanctions and pressure on Iran's trade and economic partners, which exposed that the Iranian people are right to be deeply suspicious of the US's seriousness in the path of diplomacy.

It said the continuation of such illegal behavior would make no change in Iran's logical and legitimate positions which are based on international law.

"Undoubtedly, retesting unsuccessful methods and tactics will lead to no outcome but a repetition of the same costly failures," the statement warned.

Following Trump's letter to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and the announcement of readiness to pursue the path of diplomacy in order to resolve the unnecessary and artificial crisis over Iran's peaceful nuclear program, Tehran engaged in indirect dialogue with Washington based on goodwill backed by national power



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL

and confidence, it explained.

It noted that during three rounds of talks, the Iranian negotiators outlined the country's positions and legitimate demands and made serious efforts to reach a fair, reasonable, and sustainable agreement.

According to the ministry, the Iranian negotiating team has been pursuing a specific framework based on Iran's principled approaches under international law regarding the peaceful use of nuclear energy and the termination of unjust sanctions.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei on Thursday warned of the consequences of the US's contradictory behavior and provocative positions.

"The sanctions that have been announced over the past few days under various pretexts against Iranian and non-Iranian individuals and companies are a clear sign of American policymakers' insistence on breaking the law and violating the rights and interests of other countries, as well as their efforts to disrupt friendly and legal relations between developing countries through economic terrorism," he said.

In a post on his Truth Social platform on Thursday, Trump threatened to slap secondary sanctions and cut off business with the countries that purchase Iranian oil or petrochemicals.

"All purchases of Iranian Oil or Petrochemical products must stop, NOW!" Trump said.

During his first term in office, Trump withdrew the United States in 2018 from the 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and launched a maximum pressure campaign against the country.

Trump restored that policy after returning to the White House for a second term in January, but he has since signaled a willingness to make a new deal to replace the deal.

On March 12, Trump sent a letter to Iran's leadership, asking for negotiations to reach a new deal.

Palestine Has Non-Negotiable Right to Self-Determination, Independent State

TEHRAN (PresTV) - Iran says Palestine has a "non-negotiable" right to self-determination and formation of an independent state with the occupied holy city of al-Quds as its capital.

Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations Amir Saied Irvani made the remark in an address before the UN Security Council on the situation in the West Asia region, including the Palestinian issue.

"Establishing an independent, sovereign Palestinian state with al-Quds as its capital remains the legitimate aspiration of the Palestinian people," he said.

He urged all Palestinian groups to remain united, warning that any sort of division only serves Israel's interests.

He added that Israel's military actions and the impunity granted to the regime by the United States and some Western countries are the causes of the "severe humanitarian catastrophe" in Gaza.

The Tel Aviv regime is committing further atrocities in grave violation of international law amid the US and its Western allies' continued provision of weapons, political backing, and financial support in grave violation of international law, he emphasized.

"The total blockade of food, water, fuel, and medicine imposed on Gaza constitutes collective punishment. It flagrantly violates the Fourth Geneva Convention and amounts to a war crime," Irvani said.

The Iranian diplomat stressed the need for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza, adding, "Priorities must include humanitarian access, aid delivery, and prisoner exchanges."

He further emphasized that a permanent ceasefire in Gaza must be followed by reconstruction efforts based on respect for Palestinians' rights and rejection of any schemes involving forced displacement or resettlement in third countries.

Irvani said the time is ripe for Palestine to become a full member of the United Nations "without conditions" as it meets all membership criteria.

"The US veto of [Security] Council's resolution ignored the global community's will, which overwhelmingly supported Palestine's membership through a General Assembly resolution with



143 votes in favor," he added.

Palestine is currently a UN non-member observer state, a status that was granted to it in 2012. An application to become a full UN member needs to be approved by the Council and then by at least two-thirds of the General Assembly.

The United States, the Israeli regime's biggest ally, has effectively blocked Palestinians' every attempt at being recognized as a full member by casting its veto against relevant resolutions.

In his remarks, the Iranian ambassador also warned that peace and stability in the region will remain elusive if the occupation and aggression do not end.

"The Security Council must compel Israel to withdraw its occupying forces from the Palestinian occupied territories, Lebanon, and Syria, and end its ongoing aggression and violations," he pointed out.

He once again reiterated that the terrorist and destabilizing actions of the Israeli regime and its main sponsor, the United States, are the main threat to peace

and stability in the region.

The Israeli regime's existence is built on terror, murder, aggression, and occupation, while it constantly fuels conflict, undermines regional stability, and violates international law, he said.

He criticized Israel's "deliberate, systematic, and deeply destabilizing" near-daily acts of aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon and Syria, in addition to the regime's brutal attacks in Gaza.

"Israel continues its aggression and occupation only because of full political, military, and diplomatic support from the United States," Irvani said.

"If the US stopped its support just today, Israel would be forced to follow international law and respect its obligations."

The Iranian diplomat also called on the Security Council not to remain silent but to act firmly in order to uphold international law, defend the UN Charter, and protect civilians from further harm.

On March 18, the Israeli regime assaulted Gaza and effectively ended its ceasefire agreement with the Palestinian resistance group, Hamas.

Iran Sets \$1b Handicrafts Export Target



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts announced plans to boost the country's handicrafts exports to \$1 billion annually, citing growing global interest—particularly in Isfahan's artisanal products.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday evening during the closing ceremony of the 3rd Iran-Africa Economic Cooperation Summit in Isfahan, Minister Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri emphasized the growing significance of handicrafts as a major non-oil export sector. He stated, "Iranian handicrafts, especially the artistic creations from Isfahan, are experiencing a renaissance and have become a key pillar in our non-oil export economy."

According to data cited by the minister, last year's customs-based handicrafts exports reached \$205 million, while informal suitcase trade accounted for an additional €250 million.

Salehi Amiri outlined the Ministry's ambitious target: achieving \$1 billion in annual handicrafts exports. He noted that Isfahan, with its historical and artistic prominence, is seeing strong international demand. He also referenced the recent Tehran Handicrafts Exhibition, where a handmade silver vase from Isfahan sold for 300 billion rials (around \$600,000), demonstrating the appeal of Iranian craftsmanship in luxury markets.

The minister detailed three key strategies being implemented to facilitate exports: The removal of foreign exchange repatriation restrictions, set to be implemented soon by the Central Bank; Simplification of customs regulations; and Introduction of insurance coverage for handicraft products.

"These reforms will eliminate existing barriers and enable Iranian handicrafts to gain greater access to international markets," he stated.

Touching on Iran's preparations for Expo 2025, Salehi Amiri revealed that 3,500 individuals from around the world had applied to participate in Iran's delegation. Due to logistical constraints, only 2,700 were accepted, but fruitful economic and commercial discussions were held with major companies and chambers of commerce.

On the choice of Isfahan as the host city for the Iran-Africa summit, the minister said, "Isfahan was selected because it encompasses all the necessary capacities—industrial, commercial, technological, and academic."

Yemen Targets Israeli Airbase With Hypersonic Missile After U.S. Airstrike



SANAA (Dispatches) - Yemen's Armed Forces spokesman Brigadier General Yahya Saree has announced that his country conducted a missile attack against an Israeli airbase in retaliation for the regime's genocidal war on Gaza.

In a statement on Friday, Yahya Saree said the Yemeni forces "carried out a military operation targeting the Israeli enemy's Ramat David Airbase, east of the occupied Haifa area, using a 'Palestine-2' hypersonic ballistic missile."

"The missile successfully reached its target, thanks to God, and the interceptor systems failed to intercept it," the statement added.

According to the statement, the attack took place in support of the oppressed Palestinian people against the US-backed Israeli war on Gaza.

Saree vowed that the retaliatory operations would continue until the Israeli war ends and the siege imposed on Gaza is lifted.

His statement came as the Israeli military reported that it had identified the launch of a ballistic missile from Yemen, but didn't report its interception.

The regime's military only said missile systems were "working to intercept the threat".

Sirens were set off across large swathes of the northern part of the occupied territories, including the city of Haifa, in the early hours of Friday.

Israeli media reports said an Israeli man was injured as he ran to shelters after air raid sirens sounded, adding that missile fragments fell near the Gadish settlement. According to the reports, the missile systems failed to intercept the missile.



Iranian Female Inventor Wins Top Prize at WIPO Competition

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has awarded its prize at the 50th International Exhibition of Inventions in Geneva, Switzerland, to Iranian female inventor Hasti Hosseini. Hosseini successfully utilized stem cells to control Human papillomavirus (HPV) and promote cervical wound healing. The invention also earned the Grade A Standard and Innovation Certificate from the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Inventors' Associations (IFIA), as well as the Gold Plus Medal from the Swiss judging panel in Geneva.

KITEX 2025 to Be Held More Grandly Than Ever



TEHRAN - Centers, organizations, companies, and key figures in the information and communication technology (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI) sectors across Iran and the region have emphasized the importance of hosting KITEX 2025 with increased grandeur, citing the critical role AI will play in the future of the world.

According to the Public Relations Office of KITEX 2025, in line with the Supreme Leader's call for Iran to achieve core infrastructure in artificial intelligence and secure a place among the world's top ten AI powers, AI and ICT are now recognized as engines of development and strategic industries that are driving revolutionary changes. Over the next two to three years, quantum leaps in technology are expected to challenge the security of current critical communication systems — systems upon which everyday life increasingly depends.

The rise of artificial intelligence applications, digital twin programs, quantum computing, the proliferation of the Internet of Things (IoT), and their expanding use cases are expected to create both new opportunities and unforeseen challenges. Iran's ability to survive and continue its socio-economic development will depend on effective, balanced, and constructive interaction with IT infrastructures and key information systems.

In this context, the organizers of KITEX 2025 have reaffirmed their commitment to holding the event with the utmost excellence — in alignment with the Supreme Leader's directives, the role of ICT and AI in the 7th National Development Plan, and the strategic need for time management, foresight, and showcasing Iran's competitive, export-oriented capabilities in the sector.

Organizers also underscored their dedication to honoring the interests of professionals and enthusiasts in the field. Since the early meetings of the event's policy and executive council, the exhibition has been designed to align with the Ministry of ICT's strategic goals and the diplomatic orientation of Iran's 14th government.

The KITEX 2025 Policy and Executive Council expressed gratitude to all industry leaders and stakeholders who have pledged their support for the exhibition. It clarified that the event — aimed at synergizing Iran's ICT and AI ecosystem for export growth — has been postponed due to the continuation of planning activities by the exhibition secretariat. The new date for the exhibition will be announced shortly through official media channels.

Iran Joins China's Chang'e-8 Lunar Mission



TEHRAN - Iran has officially joined the international Chang'e-8 lunar mission, a significant step in its long-term space exploration program. The announcement was made during China's Space Technology Day on April 24, 2025, where the Chinese government formally recognized Iran's participation in the mission.

According to a statement from the Iranian Space Agency (ISA), one of the key pillars of Iran's 10-year space roadmap focuses on space science and exploration, particularly biological capsules, resource utilization, and the exploration of other celestial bodies.

Given the immense costs and technological complexity involved in space resource extraction, Iran has emphasized the need for international cooperation. Two major international programs currently dominate lunar exploration: the U.S.-led Artemis program, supported by many Western and some Eastern nations, and the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) initiative, led by China and Russia — both considered global space superpowers.

The Chang'e program, part of the ILRS framework, is a cornerstone of China's lunar exploration efforts. The upcoming Chang'e-8 mission will carry a research payload developed by an Iranian academic and research institution. This collaboration follows extensive technical discussions and reflects China's growing trust in Iranian space scientists and engineers.

The Iranian payload aims to measure static electric potential on the Moon's surface. As the distribution of electric charge across the lunar surface is uneven, this measurement is seen as crucial for future scientific research and practical applications. The ISA noted that contributing to such a vital international mission offers Iran a rare and valuable opportunity to collaborate on cutting-edge lunar exploration.

Officials expressed hope that Iran's inclusion in the Chang'e-8 mission marks the beginning of broader participation in the global effort to explore and eventually utilize valuable resources on the Moon and other celestial bodies.

Petrochemical Output Capacity in Iran to Reach 105m Tons by March 2026



TEHRAN - The Managing Director of Iran's National Petrochemical Company (NPC), Hassan Abbaszadeh, announced on Wednesday that the country's petrochemical production capacity is expected to hit 105 million tons by the end of the Iranian calendar year 1404 (March 2026). Export volumes are forecasted at 34.8 million tons, generating approximately \$13.6 billion in revenue.

Speaking during a meeting with CEOs and representatives from major petrochemical holding companies and the Secretary of the Petrochemical Employers' Trade Association, Abbaszadeh expressed condolences over the recent accident at Shahid Rajaei Port and paid tribute to Iranian workers on the occasion of International Workers' Day.

He emphasized the critical importance of safety and adherence to HSE (Health, Safety, and Environment) protocols, particularly at terminals and storage facilities. He noted that the national comprehensive safety plan for petrochemical terminals and storage units is being implemented, with a focus on minimizing the time products spend at docks—especially in key regions like Asaluyeh and Mahshahr.

Following a recent inspection of petrochemical terminals in Asaluyeh, Abbaszadeh said that preparations are underway to create additional infrastructure supporting Shahid Rajaei Port, including allocated land and emergency discharge plans.

Abbaszadeh, who also serves as Deputy Oil Minister, called on petrochemical holdings and companies to actively support terminal operations and collaborate to ensure sustained development. He praised the synergy between public and private stakeholders, noting that this cooperation has led to major achievements across various sectors of the industry.

According to Abbaszadeh, Iran's petrochemical output capacity stood at approximately 97 million tons in 2024, with actual production reaching 75.2

million tons. Of this, 29.2 million tons were exported, generating \$13 billion, while domestic sales totaled 13.1 million tons, valued at around \$11 billion.

This year, new projects totaling 8.5 million tons in capacity are scheduled to come online, raising the nominal production capacity to 105 million tons and expected actual output to 83.5 million tons. For the year 1404, exports are projected to reach 34.8 million tons worth \$13.6 billion, while domestic sales are estimated at 16.1 million tons worth over \$10 billion.

Abbaszadeh highlighted that several new petrochemical projects this year are based on non-gas feedstocks, with only one relying on natural gas. Notably, three new products will be produced in Iran for the first time, and the projects will extensively utilize domestically manufactured components.

An additional 10 million cubic meters of feedstock from flare gas recovery will be supplied to the industry in 2025. Long-term sales contracts between petrochemical companies and customers are also in the finalization stages, based on a directive from the First Vice President. However, these contracts will not cover all petrochemical products.

The NPC is also exploring new feedstock sources, including flare gas from within the industry and nearby oil fields, in cooperation with major holding companies. This year, the sector will require 51 million cubic meters of natural gas for feedstock and 63 million cubic meters for fuel.

Abbaszadeh stressed the importance of energy efficiency and social responsibility in the petrochemical industry. He called on holding companies to honor their commitments in social programs and highlighted the crucial role of strategic advisory councils in ensuring accountability.

He also urged all petrochemical companies and holdings to actively participate in the upcoming Petrochemical Industry Excellence Award by nominating representatives and assisting with its implementation.

Iran and Tajikistan to Convene 17th Joint Commission Meeting in Shiraz

TEHRAN - The 17th Joint Commission for Cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Tajikistan is scheduled to be held from May 5 to 7 (15–17 Ordibehesht) in the city of Shiraz. This high-level bilateral summit aims to strengthen cooperation across various sectors including economic, cultural, social, and trade.

The meeting will be co-chaired by Iran's Minister of Energy, Abbas Aliabadi, and Tajikistan's Minister of Energy and Water Resources, Daler Juma. According to Mohammadvali Alaei-al-Dini, Head of the International Affairs Department of Iran's Ministry of Energy and the Iranian Secretary of the Commission, the event will serve as a major platform to foster mutual understanding, strengthen business ties, and advance technical and engineering services between the two nations.

"This commission offers a valuable opportunity to exchange information, explore new business avenues, enhance the capabilities of our enterprises, and introduce the latest achievements of Iranian companies," Alaei-al-Dini told reporters. He emphasized that the summit also acts as a bridge to boost exports of goods, equipment, and services between Iran and Tajikistan.

A key highlight of the summit is the scheduled B2B (business-to-business) meetings between 30 Iranian and 25 Tajik traders. These commercial sessions aim to expand private sector collaboration and create joint ventures in strategic industries.

The topics up for discussion are diverse and reflect the broadening scope of bilateral cooperation. These include water



and electricity infrastructure projects, renewable energy initiatives, oil and petrochemical development, textiles, food and agriculture, tourism, healthcare, and medical equipment. The talks are expected to lead to new business agreements and pave the way for deeper economic integration between the two countries.

Approximately 20 government institutions from various Iranian ministries will participate in the joint commission, along with 15 representatives from Tajikistan's executive bodies. Several

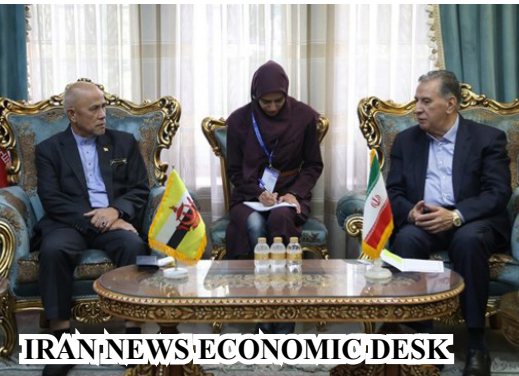
specialized expert-level working groups are scheduled to hold parallel meetings to facilitate sector-specific discussions.

The commission meeting will culminate in a formal closing ceremony, during which a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) will be signed. The document is expected to outline new areas of partnership and reaffirm the shared commitment of Iran and Tajikistan to enhancing regional cooperation.

The event is being organized by Iran's Ministry of Energy, which is also hosting the three-day commission in Shiraz, a city known for its historical and cultural significance. The choice of venue underscores the importance of cultural diplomacy alongside economic and political collaboration.

This 17th joint commission meeting reflects the ongoing efforts of both Tehran and Dushanbe to deepen their strategic ties and capitalize on each other's economic and technical strengths in an increasingly interconnected regional landscape.

Iran and Brunei Eye Stronger Trade Ties



TEHRAN - In a significant move to boost bilateral trade, the presidents of the chambers of commerce of Iran and Brunei met this week and called for the establishment of a joint Iran-Brunei Chamber of Commerce. The meeting emphasized the potential for expanded cooperation in tourism, health tourism, and information technology.

During the high-level talks, Samad Hassanzadeh, President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture, highlighted Iran's wide-ranging industrial and technological capabilities that could meet many of Brunei's market demands. "Iran possesses strong potential in sectors such as agriculture and food industries, machinery production, petrochemicals, oil and gas, building materials, and engineering services, including construction, urban development, road and railway projects, as well as the establishment of industrial plants and power stations," Hassanzadeh said.

He further underlined Iran's growing interest in expanding economic relations globally, particularly with African and Asian nations. He added that Iran's private sector is prioritizing international partnerships and the national chamber is working closely with its counterparts in other countries to lay the groundwork for stronger trade collaboration.

Hassanzadeh stressed that forming a joint chamber between Iran and Brunei would create a more structured platform for business exchange and long-term cooperation. He also pointed to the importance of facilitating the exchange of business delegations as a way to foster closer relationships between traders and investors. In this spirit, he extended an invitation to the President of Brunei's Chamber to lead a commercial delegation to Iran.

Echoing these sentiments, Abdul Salman Ahmad, President of Brunei's Chamber of Commerce, emphasized the importance of closer collaboration to strengthen bilateral trade ties. He noted that both countries share substantial resources in natural wealth and cultural heritage that can be leveraged for mutual benefit.

Iran-Azerbaijan Trade Relations Set to Reach \$5 Billion



TEHRAN - The level of trade between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan is expected to rise to \$5 billion following recent high-level discussions between the two nations' leaders, according to Sodeif Badri, head of the Iran-Azerbaijan Parliamentary Friendship Group and representative of Ardabil, Nir, Namin, and Sarein in the Iranian Parliament.

In an interview with IRNA, Badri stated that current trade between the two countries is under \$1 billion. However, as per agreements reached during President Masoud Pezeshkian's recent visit to Baku, the goal is to raise bilateral trade to at least \$1 billion by the end of the year, eventually scaling it up to \$5 billion.

Describing the President's trip as highly successful and impactful, Badri said the main purpose was to expand economic and commercial ties. The visit was made at the invitation of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.

The Iranian lawmaker emphasized that the visit positively influenced bilateral trade relations and allowed both sides to revisit and reinforce existing agreements. He noted that seven cooperation documents signed between Iranian and Azerbaijani ministers would further solidify these gains.

Badri added that President Pezeshkian's trip generated significant optimism for the future of bilateral ties. Several meetings were held during the visit, including sessions with Azerbaijani officials, business leaders, and traders from both nations. The Azerbaijani side gave a warm welcome, signaling strong interest in boosting relations.

The two presidents also signed a joint statement committing to remove operational barriers hindering trade development. Among the key issues raised by Iran were facilitating land-border crossings for Iranian students and reopening certain ground border points for passenger travel. Azerbaijan has agreed to closely examine the reopening of these borders.

Farage's Reform UK Party Support Surges

LONDON (Dispatches) - Nigel Farage's right-wing Reform UK party made early gains in local English election results on Friday and won a parliamentary by-election by the smallest ever margin in the first major electoral test since last year's general election.

The populist Reform, led by the Brexit campaigner Farage, hopes a strong performance in English local elections to be announced through Friday will mark the start of the breakdown of Britain's century-old two-party political system, dominated by the governing Labour Party and opposition Conservatives.

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Trump Ousts White House National Security Adviser Waltz



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump ousted his national security adviser Mike Waltz on Thursday and named Secretary of State Marco Rubio as his interim replacement in the first major shakeup of Trump's inner circle since he took office in January.

Trump, in a social media post, said he would nominate Waltz to be the next U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, adding that "he has worked hard to put our nation's interests first."

Earlier in the day, multiple sources said Trump had decided to remove Waltz from his national security post. The retired Army Green Beret and former Republican lawmaker from Florida had faced criticism inside the White House, particularly after he was caught up in a March scandal involving a Signal chat among top Trump national security aides.

Rubio will be the first person since Henry Kissinger in the 1970s to hold the positions of secretary of state and national security adviser simultaneously.

"When I have a problem, I call up Marco. He gets it solved," Trump said at a White House event earlier on Thursday.

A person familiar with the matter said Trump wanted to get to the 100-day mark in his term before firing a cabinet-level official. News of the shake-up on Thursday was so abrupt that State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce learned about it from reporters at a briefing.

The national security adviser is a powerful role that does not require Senate confirmation. Trump had four national security advisers in his first term: Michael Flynn, H.R. McMaster, John Bolton and Robert O'Brien.

UN Eyes Major Overhaul Amid Funding Crisis



UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) - The United Nations is considering a massive overhaul that would merge major departments and shift resources across the globe, according to an internal memo prepared by senior officials tasked with reforming the world body.

The high-level review comes as U.N. agencies scramble to cope with the fallout from U.S. foreign aid cuts under President Donald Trump that have gutted humanitarian agencies.

The six-page document, marked "strictly confidential" and reviewed by Reuters, contains a list of what it terms "suggestions" that would consolidate dozens of U.N. agencies into four primary departments: peace and security, humanitarian affairs, sustainable development, and human rights.

Under one option, for example, operational aspects of the World Food Programme, the U.N. children's agency, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.N. refugee agency would be merged into a single humanitarian entity, it said.

The memo contains a range of suggestions, some large, some small, some speculative, which, if all adopted, would represent the most sweeping reforms in decades.



PARIS (Dispatches) - French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said Thursday that the European Union is preparing to hit Russia with a 17th round of sanctions, describing President Vladimir Putin as the "sole obstacle" to peace in Ukraine.

The 27-nation bloc has imposed unprecedented penalties on Russia in response to its invasion, and said this year it would not lift sanctions before Putin's "unconditional" withdrawal of forces from Ukraine.

"We Europeans will accompany this American (sanctions) initiative with a 17th package of sanctions and I committed yesterday to (US Senator) Lindsey Graham that we would try to coordinate both the substance and the timing of these two packages of sanctions," Barrot told AFP in an interview.

Graham has rallied dozens of lawmakers from both parties to support a plan to impose additional sanctions on Moscow as well as tariffs on countries that buy Russian energy, the Wall Street Journal has reported.

Barrot took aim at Russia's president during the interview, saying: "It is now crystal clear that the only obstacle to peace today in Ukraine is Vladimir Putin."

Moscow's forces launched an all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 in a bid to seize control that Kyiv thwarted with the help of international assistance provided primarily by the United States and countries in Europe.

Ukraine "accepted an unconditional ceasefire and yesterday it agreed to conclude an agreement on critical minerals with the United States", Barrot said.

That, "according to statements by Ukrainian officials, corresponds I would say to Ukraine's expectations of engaging in economic cooperation with the United States, but also with other countries", he said.

"Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin's Russia has made no effort, has sent no sign that it is ready for the ceasefire or the peace

that President Donald Trump aspires to, and that the Europeans and of course the Ukrainians aspire to," Barrot said.

The French minister did not rule out the possibility that France, which he said has "expertise" in rare earth minerals, could also conclude an economic agreement with Ukraine.

Washington's deal with Kyiv would see the United States and Ukraine jointly develop and invest in the war-battered country's critical mineral resources.

Ukraine hopes the deal will eventually pave the way for security guarantees from the United States, as it seeks to safeguard against future Russian attacks.

Barrot spoke to AFP shortly after meeting with his US counterpart Marco Rubio and said that he welcomed their frank talks.

"We had an unfiltered exchange that allowed us to coordinate closely, but also to acknowledge the convergence of our objectives on regional and international crises, since we want to act in concert," the French minister said.

Barrot and Rubio met "to advance the path to peace in Ukraine", State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said. "The secretary made clear that President Trump is focused on halting the senseless bloodshed in Ukraine and affirmed a US commitment to working closely with France and other European partners to secure a lasting peace," she added.

For Barrot, "this is a decisive moment for Europe".

He noted that French President Emmanuel Macron has been calling for years for European strategic autonomy and "a European pillar for NATO".

On tariffs imposed by Washington, Barrot called for "de-escalation so that we can return to the situation that preceded decisions taken by the Trump administration in the interest of both the United States and Europe".

Pakistan Rejects Indian Accusations Over Pahalgam Attack, Demands Independent Probe

TEHRAN - Pakistan's Ambassador to Iran, H.E. Muhammad Mudassar Tipu, on Wednesday forcefully rejected Indian allegations linking Islamabad to the recent terrorist attack in Pahalgam, located in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Speaking at a media briefing in Tehran, the envoy dismissed the claims as baseless and politically motivated, warning that such rhetoric could seriously endanger regional peace.

Ambassador Tipu expressed Pakistan's deep concern over the loss of innocent lives in the April 30 incident and reiterated his country's firm stance against terrorism in all forms. "As a nation that has borne the brunt of terrorism, we grieve with the victims," he said, extending condolences to the families affected.

However, he condemned what he described as India's attempt to exploit the tragedy for political gains. "These accusations are not only unfounded but also part of a broader disinformation campaign aimed at deflecting attention from India's own internal failures and repression in Kashmir," Tipu stated.

The ambassador criticized the Indian media and political establishment for what he called "Islamophobic and inflammatory narratives" that further inflame tensions in the region. He warned that the escalation of such rhetoric was dragging South Asia toward instability.

Referring to international engagement, Tipu noted



Pakistan's constructive role in the United Nations Security Council, which issued a strong condemnation of the Pahalgam attack. He reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to regional peace and restraint but cautioned that the country would not hesitate to defend its sovereignty if provoked.

A significant point of contention raised during the briefing was India's reported move to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), a vital agreement governing water sharing between the two countries. Ambassador Tipu described the action as "illegal and reckless," warning that any attempt to alter Pakistan's water share would be seen as an act of war.

"Such a move endangers millions of livelihoods in Pakistan and undermines a key pillar of regional cooperation," he said.

Calling for an independent and impartial investigation into the Pahalgam incident, the ambassador stressed that Pakistan had no involvement and no motive. "This situation demands a neutral inquiry, not hasty blame games," he asserted.

He urged the international community to differentiate between sympathy for victims and support for India's aggressive posture. "Uncritical endorsement of Indian claims risks legitimizing dangerous brinkmanship in a nuclear-armed region," Tipu cautioned.

The ambassador's remarks come amid heightened tensions between the two neighbors, with Islamabad warning of serious consequences if India continues to escalate the situation through rhetoric and unilateral actions.

Israel Strikes Near Damascus Presidential Palace Following Druze Violence

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Israel's military said Friday it launched air strikes near the presidential palace in Damascus after the country's defence minister threatened intervention if Syrian authorities failed to protect the Druze minority.

Syria's Druze spiritual leader has condemned a "genocidal campaign" against his community after sectarian clashes killed 102 people. The violence poses a serious challenge to the Islamist authorities in Syria who ousted longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad in December.

Israel has since then attacked hundreds of Syrian military sites and on Friday announced its "fighter jets struck adjacent to the area of the palace" in the capital Damascus, a military statement said.

Syrian Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri had denounced the sectarian violence near Damascus as an "unjustifiable genocidal campaign".

He called in a statement Thursday for immediate intervention by "international forces to maintain peace and prevent the continuation of these crimes".



The Druze killings come after a wave of massacres in March in Syria's Alawite heartland on the Mediterranean coast in which security forces and allied groups killed more than 1,700 civilians, mostly from Assad's Alawite community, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani on Thursday called for "national unity" as "the solid foundation for any process of stability or revival".

"Any call for external intervention, under any pretext or slogan, only leads to further deterioration and division," he wrote on X.

Israel sees the new forces in Syria as jihadists and has warned them to protect the Druze minority, with Defense Minister Israel Katz saying his country could otherwise respond "with significant force".

Israel carried out strikes near Damascus on Wednesday and has also sent troops into the demilitarised buffer zone that used to separate Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights.



Spurs, Man United Close in on Europa League Final

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham closed in on a place in the Europa League final after Brennan Johnson struck just 38 seconds into their 3-1 win against Norwegian side Bodo/Glimt.

Johnson's quick-fire opener was followed by James Maddison's strike before the interval in the semi-final first leg at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

Dominic Solanke's second-half penalty should have been the end of the tie.

But a late goal from Ulrik Saltnes ensured the second leg on May 8 will be a nervous occasion for beleaguered Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou.

Postecoglou will also have to sweat on the fitness of Solanke and Maddison after both limped off with injuries.

If Tottenham can get the job done in Norway, they will face Manchester United or Athletic Bilbao in the final on May 21, with the tournament winners qualifying for the Champions League next season.

United are on course for the final after winning 3-0 in Bilbao in the first leg.

"We're in a good position. I thought the players were outstanding. They were everything they needed to be, really calm going forward and maintained the pressure," Postecoglou said.

"Bodo/Glimt scored a late goal, so the scoreline didn't totally reflect our dominance.

"We have to accept that but if we repeat that performance next week it will be enough for us to get through."

An all-Premier League clash in the final would present a fascinating duel between two clubs enduring miserable domestic campaigns.

Languishing in 16th place in the Premier League, Tottenham's woeful 5-1 thrashing at Liverpool on Sunday was a club record-equalling 19th defeat in the top flight this season.

They have not suffered so many losses in a Premier League campaign since 2004.

Despite their abysmal top-flight form, Tottenham should reach their first European final since the 2019 Champions League as they bid to end a 17-year trophy drought.

Meanwhile Bruno Fernandes struck twice as Manchester United put one foot in the Europa League final with a clinical away performance to beat 10-man Athletic Bilbao 3-0.

The fervent home fans were enraged when Athletic defender Daniel Vivian was sent off for pulling back Rasmus Hojlund and Fernandes slotted home the resulting penalty, after Casemiro had opened the scoring against the run of play in the semi-final first leg.

Fernandes rolled in a third before half-time as Ruben Amorim's side moved a step closer to the final, to be held at Athletic's San Mames stadium.

The hosts have been dreaming of winning a first European trophy on their own soil but their hopes were demolished by United's professional display in the north of Spain — and Athletic's supporters argued, the refereeing.

"I think it's the best result (of my tenure) because nobody expected this result — but you saw two games today," Amorim told reporters.

"The first 25 mins, then (another one) after the goal and the sending-off."

Languishing in 14th in the Premier League, Champions League qualification for United is only possible with a Europa League triumph, as is access to the £100 million (\$133 million) honeypot it entails.

Despite regularly crumbling under pressure this season, the Red Devils — who produced a stunning comeback against Lyon in the quarter-finals — first survived and then thrived in a hostile environment.

"We looked a little bit nervous at times in the first 20 minutes... we weathered the storm and we knew we'd get our chance," Man United's Harry Maguire told TNT Sports.

"It was a clinical first half, professional second half... It's a great victory in the end but there's another big game next week."

With May 1 a bank holiday in Spain the streets of Bilbao were filled with red-and-white striped shirts from the morning onwards, in party mode.

Piastri Defends Norris After Jones's Weak Jibe



MIAMI (Dispatches) - Oscar Piastri has leapt to the defence of McLaren teammate Lando Norris after the Briton was accused of being "weak" by ex-Formula One world champion Alan Jones.

Jones lauded his fellow Australian as a future world champion after Piastri took the championship lead with his third grand prix victory of the season in Saudi Arabia two weekends ago.

But Piastri, who is 10 points clear of Norris going into this weekend's Miami Grand Prix, said: "Everybody is different. For me, the most important thing is to try to do things in the style most natural to you.

"When you try to do things that aren't your natural way of being a person that's when things become confusing. It's when things start to go wrong.

"Everyone handles that differently. Lando handles that quite differently to how I handle it. Probably a lot of the emotions across the grid that happen regardless of whether they're in the public or not they're probably pretty similar.

"I think that's just kind of how we're wired as people and as competitors. Obviously there's different emotions and different ways of dealing with that. I don't think there's a right or wrong way.

"It's very individual to the person. I'm quite different probably at the other end of the spectrum. If that's what you feel is the best way of venting or trying to reset yourself then go for it."

Since winning the season opener in Australia, Norris has struggled with the handling of this year's McLaren.

He crashed in qualifying in Jeddah denting his race hopes and has fallen behind Piastri in the championship as a result.

Jones, the 1980 champion, told Fox Sports this week that he thought Norris was mentally "quite a weak person.

"He's coming out with all this nonsense that he's got a bit of a mental thing, he's dwelling on some of the problems he's had rather than the positives. When they start talking all that nonsense, you know you've got them."

Forest's Top-Five Hopes Hit the Skids After Brentford Breakaway



NOTTINGHAM (Dispatches) - Nottingham Forest suffered a huge blow in their push for a return to the Champions League after decades away as Brentford came away from the City Ground with a 2-0 win.

A third defeat in four games, courtesy of goals from Kevin Schade and Yoane Wissa, leaves the stumbling two-time European champions outside the Premier League's top five with just four games remaining.

Liverpool have already won the Premier League and second-placed Arsenal have a comfortable cushion but just five points separate third-placed Newcastle from seventh-paced Aston Villa.

This season, the top five will all qualify for the Champions League after strong performances in Europe from Premier League teams.

Not since 1980, under former manager Brian Clough, have Forest played in the continent's top club competition.

But after a season spent largely in the upper reaches of the Premier League they are suffering a major wobble at the worst possible moment.

"It's a bad night and a bad game," Forest manager Nuno Espirito Santo told Sky Sports. "I'm not really worried about the table, more how to correct the mistakes.

"Credit to Brentford but the situations we should solve normally with better defending. We are disappointed but it's about reacting and going for the next one."

He added: "There are still four games to go, a lot of football to be played. We have to focus on ourselves and play better football."

Forest would have climbed to third with a win but despite the defeat they have 60 points, just two behind Newcastle, with Manchester City, Chelsea and Villa also in the mix.

Brunson Hits Late Trey, Seals Series vs. Pistons

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jalen Brunson scored 40 points, including the tiebreaking 3-pointer with 4.3 seconds left, as the visiting New York Knicks advanced to the Eastern Conference semifinals with a 116-113 victory over the Detroit Pistons in Game 6 on Thursday.

Mikal Bridges contributed 25 points and OG Anunoby added 22 points as the third-seeded Knicks finished off a 4-2 first-round series win over the sixth-seeded Pistons and moved into the conference semifinals for the third consecutive year. New York will face the Celtics, starting with Game 1 in Boston on Monday.

"It's all about us poised and having that composure," Brunson said. "Obviously, we want to have it throughout the game, but it's most important at the end. We all have each other's backs, and we all know what we want to do. Just thankful for my teammates and coaches."

Cade Cunningham had 23 points and Jalen Duren added 21 for the Pistons, who have lost an NBA-record 10 straight home playoff games since 2008. The visiting team won five of the six games in the series. Malik Beasley, who had 18 points in the first half, finished with 20, and he committed a game-ending turnover after Brunson's clutch shot.

"They made some plays," Pistons coach J.B. Bickerstaff said.



"Obviously, there were some balls that just didn't bounce our way. But again, I thought our guys fought their tails off and did everything they could do to put themselves in position to win the game."

The Knicks appeared to break the game open in the third quarter as Bridges' dunk pushed the cushion to 86-73. The Pistons struggled on offense, missing 12 of their 18 shots in the quarter, including all

seven 3-point attempts.

New York kept a comfortable cushion in the fourth quarter before Detroit tightened its defense and ran off 11 straight points to tie the game at 103 with 6:06 remaining. The Pistons followed by scoring nine of the next 11 points to build a 112-105 lead on a jumper from Tim Hardaway Jr.

Brunson had a three-point play and another basket and Karl-Anthony Towns split a pair of free throws to pull the Knicks within 112-111 with 1:19 left.

After Duren made one of two free throws, Bridges tipped in a rebound with 35.6 seconds left to tie the game at 113. Cunningham missed an ensuing shot and Brunson got the ball, raced down the court and hit the game-winner from the top of the 3-point arc.

Meanwhile Rudy Gobert scored 27 points and grabbed 24 rebounds as the visiting Minnesota Timberwolves advanced to the Western Conference semifinals with a 103-96 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers in Game 5.

Julius Randle put up 23 points as the sixth-seeded Timberwolves finished off a 4-1 first-round series win over the third-seeded Lakers. The rebound total for Gobert was a Timberwolves postseason record and his personal career playoff high.

Chelsea Crush Djurgarden 4-1 to Take Charge of UEFA Conference League Semi

STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - Chelsea strolled to a comfortable 4-1 win at Djurgarden in the first leg of their UEFA Conference League semi-final to all but book their spot in the final.

In the other semi-final, Spain's Real Betis take a 2-1 lead into the return fixture against two-time runners-up Fiorentina.

First-half goals from Jadon Sancho and Noni Madueke put Chelsea in control in Sweden, before Nicolas Jackson grabbed a brace midway through the second period.

"It was (a perfect night), an important semi-final," Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca told TNT Sports.

"It's a good result, but we have the experience from the Legia Warsaw game, where we won 3-0 there and we struggled a little bit (Chelsea's only loss in the tournament came at home in the return fixture), so we need to be focused on the second leg."



Maresca's side have one foot in the final of the Conference League in their debut campaign in the third-tier European competition.

Lifting the trophy in the Polish city of Wroclaw on May 28 would add another continental title to the London club's haul of two Champions Leagues, a pair of Europa Leagues and two Uefa Cup Winners' Cups.

Their opponents, on the other hand, don't quite boast the same European pedigree, and in making the last four became the first Swedish side to play a semi-final in Europe since 1986/87.

To further add to Djurgarden's underdog status, coach Jani Honkavaara only had 14 senior players fit to call upon for the visit of the Premier League giants.