

Head of Pardis Technology Park Says Six International Agreements Worth \$2b Were Signed on the Sidelines of INOTEX 2025, Which Was Underway for Four Days

# IRAN NEWS

Reaffirming Iran's Right to Possess the Full Nuclear Fuel Cycle, Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Said Tehran Can Enrich Uranium While Rejecting Nukes, Like Several Other NPT Members

VOL. XXIX, No. 8256 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SUNDAY MAY 04, 2025 ORDIBEHESHT 14, 1404

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## Iran Rejects France's Absurd Claims on Nuclear Weapons, Sanctions



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry has dismissed as "simply absurd" France's claims about Tehran being on the verge of developing a nuclear weapon.

In a post on his X account on Friday, Esmail Baghaei said the French foreign minister's claim that Iran is on the "cusp of developing" a nuclear weapon is simply absurd.

"This false statement, coupled with the Minister's open threats to reimpose sanctions, reinforces the suspicion that France's nagging posture risks evolving into a spoiling role," he added.

The Iranian spokesperson warned that France's spoiling role would add no credit to the European country and its status in Europe and across the world.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said on Tuesday that Paris, along with Germany and Britain, "will not hesitate for a single second to reapply all the sanctions" lifted a decade ago if European security is threatened by Iran's nuclear activities.

He accused Tehran of being on the cusp of covertly developing a nuclear weapon.

In letters to UN chief General Antonio Guterres and Security Council head Jérôme Bonnafont, Iran's Ambassador to the UN Amir Saïd Iravani lambasted the French foreign minister's open threat to reimpose sanctions lifted under the 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"Resorting to threats and economic blackmail is entirely unacceptable and represents a clear breach of the principles enshrined in the UN Charter," Iravani said.

France's allegations came as Iran and the US have held three rounds of talks in the Omani capital of Muscat and the Italian capital of Rome on April 12, 19 and 26 with the aim of reaching a deal on Iran's nuclear program and the removal of sanctions on Tehran.

## Negotiations Are Inherently Political, Must Serve National Interests



TEHRAN - Ali Larijani, advisor to the Supreme Leader of Iran, stated on Saturday that negotiations are fundamentally dependent on timing and conditions, and emphasized that the essence of Iran's nuclear issue is political rather than legal.

Speaking at a ceremony marking Teachers' Day at Shahed University on May 3, 2025, Larijani addressed the topic of Iran-U.S. negotiations. "You should ask the Foreign Minister about that," he said, "but I will share my view: whether to negotiate or not must be based on national interests. Negotiation has no intrinsic virtue or vice. If talks serve our interests, then they are justified. If not, there is no reason to continue."

Larijani emphasized that the current challenge surrounding Iran's nuclear case is not legal in nature. "If it were a legal issue and the IAEA had issued a clear opinion, there would be no reason to negotiate. The nature of this issue is political," he explained.

He continued, "Why is this the case? Because the modern world operates on power politics and coercion. Iran says it needs nuclear knowledge and abides by accepted frameworks, but others respond with force. How should we deal with that pressure? That's another matter. If now, for instance, the other side sends a letter expressing willingness to negotiate, the key question is whether negotiations would actually produce results."

## U.S. Must Prove Serious Intent to Make Progress in Talks With Iran



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Araqchi says any progress in indirect talks with the U.S. hinges on Washington demonstrating serious intent and adopting a realistic approach to the negotiations.

Speaking in a phone conversation with UN Chief Antonio Guterres on Friday, Araqchi said the inconsistencies in US behavior, as well as continued threats and sanctions against Iran, have further fueled doubts about Washington's commitment to pursuing diplomacy.

He stated that advancing "this path requires serious will and realism on the part of the other party, and emphasized that Iran, as a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, while adhering to its obligations, insists on the Iranian nation benefiting from nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, which requires enrichment."

The Iranian minister stressed that, to reach a balanced, fair, and durable agreement, all parties must refrain from making demands that contradict the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

He also cited the US failure to abide by its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal, emphasizing that other parties must provide guarantees to remove sanctions and allow Iran to benefit economically from any replacement for the 2015 deal.

"The contradictory behaviors and statements of US officials, along with the continuation of sanctions and threats against the Iranian nation, have intensified distrust and suspicion of the seriousness of the US in advancing the path of diplomacy," he stated.

Araqchi also pointed out that several rounds of talks were held with three European countries, Germany, France and the UK, over the past year, and emphasized Iran's readiness to continue interacting with European parties and expressed hope that these three countries would adopt a constructive approach towards the peaceful resolution of existing disputes.

The UN chief, for his part, underscored the importance of continuing talks until they yield results.

The UN secretary general also appreciated the innovative approach of Iran's foreign minister in explaining the developments related to the indirect Iran-US talks.

In a separate post on X, Araqchi said, "I generally refrain from airing arguments on key negotiation elements through the media."

"What I will say is that repeating falsehoods will not change basic facts," he said.

"As a founding signatory to the NPT, Iran has every right to possess the full nuclear fuel cycle. Moreover, there are several NPT members that enrich uranium while wholly rejecting nuclear weapons. Apart from Iran, this club includes several Asian, European, and South American nations," he said.

"Maximalist positioning and incendiary rhetoric achieve nothing except eroding the chances of success," he stated.

"A credible and durable agreement is within reach. All it takes is firm political will and a fair attitude," Araqchi said.

## We Did Not Enter Negotiations to Waste Time



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - In an interview, Government Spokesperson Fateme Mohajerani stated that Iran has no interest in fueling regional conflict and emphasized the country's commitment to productive negotiations. "We did not enter negotiations to waste time," she affirmed, underlining Tehran's genuine desire to reach a positive outcome.

Addressing threats made by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to bomb Iran's nuclear sites, as well as warnings from the French Foreign Minister regarding the reinstatement of sanctions if talks fail, Mohajerani said, "As our Foreign Minister and his spokesperson have stated, they must know that any action will receive a firm response from Iran. We are not joking in this regard and will not tolerate such threats."

She further stressed that while Iran is fully prepared for all scenarios, it remains committed to dialogue. "We are not interested in conflict. We are moving forward with the country's affairs regardless of the outcome, but naturally, we hope for a successful conclusion to the negotiations."

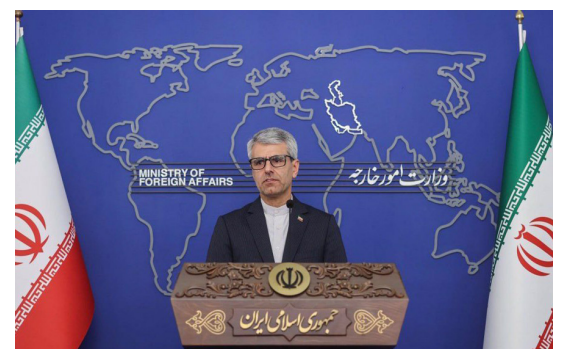
On the topic of the recent visit by the Saudi Arabian Defense Minister, Mohajerani highlighted the significance of Iran-Saudi ties. "This visit was more than just a diplomatic trip; it demonstrated the success of Iran's strategic approach towards Saudi Arabia and signaled Iran's active role in the region. The meeting with the Supreme Leader further underscored its importance."

Commenting on market fluctuations coinciding with the diplomatic talks, Mohajerani acknowledged that external factors impact domestic production. She referred to recent statements by the Supreme Leader and President stressing the importance of not tying Iran's markets to the negotiations.

When asked about concerns over alleged mafia influence in the import-export sectors manipulating currency and commodity prices, Mohajerani responded, "There is no doubt that speculative activities affect our economy. These pressures are compounded by psychological factors such as international threats and negotiations, just as they are in other countries."

She concluded by distinguishing between the existence of economic mafias and actual pricing mechanisms, stating, "These are two separate issues, and both are being closely monitored—particularly by the Central Bank."

## Iran Condemns Repeated U.S. Attacks in Yemen



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry has strongly condemned the repeated attacks by the US military on various areas of Yemen, targeting the country's infrastructure and residential areas.

On Friday night, Esmail Baghaei called the U.S. military aggression against Yemen a clear violation of Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

He described it as a gross violation of the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.

Baghaei emphasized that these attacks are considered war crimes and crimes against humanity because they target residential areas and vital infrastructure in Yemen.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman expressed regret over the inaction of the United Nations and the UN Security Council in response to the US's blatant violation of international law.

He condemned Washington's continued aggression against Yemen, along with the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the West Bank and the Zionist regime's terrorist actions against Lebanon.

Baghaei said that these attacks are contributing to the increasing insecurity in the West Asian region.

He added that they reminded all countries in the region of the shared responsibility to confront the Zionist regime and the US.

Nearly 70 inmates were killed and more than 50 more wounded in the US airstrike that targeted one of the detention centers designated for African migrants in Sa'ada province of Yemen on Monday.

## Russian Tourists Waiting for Putin's Green Light to Visit Iran



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Despite close political and economic ties between Iran and countries like Russia and China, the number of tourists from these nations visiting Iran remains surprisingly low. Expectations that visa waivers would boost tourism have not materialized, with both Russian and Chinese travelers still showing limited interest in Iran as a destination.

Speaking to ILNA News Agency, Russian tour operator Andrey Dmitriev, one of four operators who traveled to Tehran for a B2B tourism summit, emphasized that while Iran's rich historical and cultural heritage is highly appealing to Russians, political endorsement is crucial. "In Russia, people need a green light from Putin to consider Iran a viable travel destination," he said, highlighting the strong influence of the Russian government in shaping public travel choices.

Dmitriev acknowledged that although thousands of Russians visit Iran annually—especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, which shifted Russian tourism from Europe and China to newer destinations—the numbers are still far from significant. "If Iran expects millions of Russian tourists, political negotiations at the highest level are necessary," he noted.

Iranian tourism officials have long faced criticism from industry professionals for the lack of strategic planning and ineffective promotional efforts. The government has attempted to attract tourists by eliminating visa requirements for several countries, but results have been

underwhelming.

According to Hormatollah Rafiei, head of the Iranian Travel Services Association, fewer than 1% of the 5.2 million Russians who visited Turkey last year chose Iran. This has raised questions about the true impact of diplomatic relations on tourism inflows.

Dmitriev argued that large-scale international events and tourism expos are not sufficient to drive significant numbers of Russian tourists to Iran. He emphasized the need for top-level agreements on tourism and banking cooperation, particularly in solving issues related to cash transactions and the absence of international credit card services in Iran.

"The lack of electronic banking options is a major deterrent," he said. "Resolving these issues would

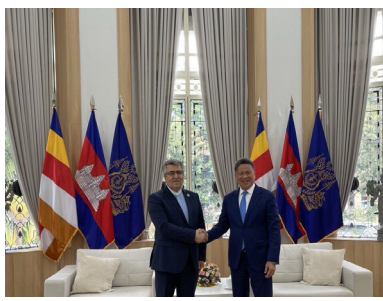
make Iran more accessible to Russian tourists."

He also criticized the limited promotion of Iran in Russia, noting that many Russians still refer to Iran as "Persia" and have minimal knowledge about the country. "Over 98% of Russians don't really know Iran. Without a well-funded and widespread promotional campaign, interest will remain low," he warned.

Dmitriev concluded that Iran must pair its political diplomacy with robust international marketing strategies to make real inroads in the tourism sector. "This is the best time to act," he urged, pointing to the changing global travel patterns and the need for infrastructure upgrades and bilateral agreements.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iran, Cambodia Express Readiness to Strengthen Bilateral Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sun Chanthol and Iran's Ambassador to Vietnam, Ali Akbar Nazari, have expressed their readiness to develop bilateral relations.

Nazari, who is also accredited in Cambodia, expressed Iran's willingness to share its expertise in technical and engineering fields, industry, nanotechnology, petrochemicals, refinery construction, general construction, and road-making. He also emphasized Iran's interest in participating in development projects and strengthening Cambodia's infrastructure. He called for accelerating the finalization and signing of the treaty to support investment.

## Iran, Uzbekistan Eye Preferential Trade Deal Amid Calls to Scrap Business Visas



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Iran-Uzbekistan Business Forum was held at the Iran Expo exhibition center, hosted by the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran in collaboration with the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) and the Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Chamber of Commerce. The forum brought together government officials and business leaders from both countries, including ICCIMA Vice President Payam Bagheri.

Bagheri highlighted the long-standing cultural ties between Iran and Uzbekistan, describing the growing enthusiasm for bilateral economic cooperation as a natural outcome of these shared connections. He noted that Iran possesses significant capabilities across sectors such as agriculture, food industries, mining, energy, and tourism.

Despite a bilateral trade volume of \$500 million in the past year, Bagheri argued that this figure falls far short of the potential between the two economies. He emphasized the importance of a preferential trade agreement between Iran and Uzbekistan, calling it a vital step toward significantly boosting trade volume. "With closer cooperation between the chambers of commerce, trade could easily exceed \$1 billion," he said.

Bagheri also called for the abolition of business visas, the removal of banking obstacles, and the expansion of the trade basket to include more innovative and technology-driven sectors. He urged for the swift signing of the preferential trade agreement and reaffirmed Iran's readiness to facilitate trade delegations between Tehran and Tashkent.

Uzbekistan-Iran Joint Council Chair Muradkhan echoed these sentiments, praising the technological advancement of Iranian industries, which he witnessed during the Iran Expo 2025. He expressed optimism about deepening commercial ties and extended an invitation to more Uzbek entrepreneurs to visit Iran.

Mousa Aghaei, President of the Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Chamber, highlighted mutual tourism potential and advocated for closer cooperation between companies in this field. He also pushed for the elimination of visa requirements for Iranian traders and emphasized leveraging the chamber's resources to support the tourism sector.

## Ankara Ready to Expand Trade Ties with Iran



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A member of the Turkish Grand National Assembly representing the city of Van has announced Ankara's readiness to expand trade and economic cooperation with Iran, particularly with the province of Zanjan, citing the region's economic, industrial, and investment potential.

Speaking on Friday during a meeting with the Governor of Zanjan, Turkish MP Kayhan Turkmenoglu expressed satisfaction with his visit to the city. He emphasized that if the highlighted capacities are properly managed and promoted, Zanjan could play a much more significant role in the economic relations between the two neighboring countries.

Turkmenoglu pointed to the 8th Joint Consultative Commission between Iran and Turkey held in November 2023, attended by both countries' presidents. He said that the meeting set clear goals, the most notable of which is raising bilateral trade volume from the current \$7 billion to \$30 billion in the near future.

Stressing the vital role of the private sector in achieving this target, the Turkish lawmaker noted that efforts are underway to develop transportation routes, expand border terminals, and streamline trade activities to support economic stakeholders in both countries.

He also highlighted shared cultural and tourism programs, announcing that 2025 has been declared the Year of Iran-Turkey Tourism.

Turkmenoglu added that Turkey will participate extensively in this year's Tehran International Book Fair, and that 200 Turkish traders attended the recent Iran Expo — the largest delegation from any country.

Having previously visited Iranian cities such as Tabriz, Urmia, Mashhad, Isfahan, and Qom, Turkmenoglu stated this was his first visit to Zanjan. He was surprised that despite Zanjan's strong industrial and commercial potential, traders from Van had not yet established ties with the city.

He praised Zanjan's success in attracting foreign investment in a short time, attributing it to effective local governance and planning.

# Proposal for Iran-Turkmenistan Joint Free Trade Zone Gains Momentum



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Ramazan Bahrami, President of the Iran-Turkmenistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, has called for the establishment of a joint free trade zone between Iran and Turkmenistan, emphasizing the deep-rooted historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties between the two neighboring nations.

Bahrami outlined how over 25 years of diplomatic engagement have laid the groundwork for a rational and realistic framework for bilateral cooperation. He highlighted Turkmenistan's strategic potential as a transit route for goods to and from Iran, alongside its substantial hydrocarbon reserves, especially natural gas, which make it a key player in Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia.

Iran has already contributed to more than 100 industrial projects in Turkmenistan, including the Tajen-Sarakhs-Mashhad railway, a \$139 million gas pipeline project in western Turkmenistan, and the \$167 million Friendship Dam in the country's south.

However, Bahrami acknowledged a range of challenges hampering trade, such as outstanding debts on gas and electricity, weak infrastructure development on Iran's part (notably in the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway corridor), lack of direct banking ties, delays in visa issuance for long-time Iranian traders, and logistical barriers at border crossings.

Additional obstacles include excessive border tariffs, high port fees in Turkmenbashi for Iranian ships, costly transportation, wagon shortages, trade restrictions like tariffs on cement and waterproofing materials, and non-enforcement of signed bilateral agreements, including investment protections and customs cooperation.

To address these issues, Bahrami proposed 22 concrete measures to enhance bilateral ties, including:

Establishing a clear strategic roadmap in sectors like energy, rail transport, culture, and medical tourism; Resolving financial disputes and trader claims; Launching a credit line using Bank Saderat's branch in Ashgabat; Restoring 24-hour activity at land and rail borders; reating a Mutually-Managed Trade Zone at Sarakhs; Facilitating visa access and easing money transfers; Promoting joint cultural initiatives, such as a shared Magtymguly Foundation; Building technical institutes in Turkmenistan in exchange for gas barter deals; Increasing private sector participation in economic policy-making; and resuming transit truck movement through Turkmenistan.

Bahrami placed special emphasis on the Sarakhs Special Economic Zone, which, despite its strategic position and access to rail, airport, and natural gas infrastructure, remains underdeveloped. He urged revitalization efforts to transform it into a key regional production and trade hub.

Looking ahead, he proposed establishing a joint Iran-Turkmenistan free trade zone using the newly approved Incheh Borun free zone as a model. He also recommended the creation of a new border crossing at Hasanqoli to facilitate cross-border trade and travel.

Finally, Bahrami warned that Turkmenistan is no longer the prime destination for Iranian exports it once was. He stressed the need for adaptive trade strategies based on evolving market demands, especially in sectors like minerals, construction materials, citrus, and plastics.

This renewed push for economic integration comes as Iran prepares for Iran Expo 2025, a major international trade event, where regional connectivity and export diversification are expected to be key themes.

# Challenges and Requirements for Exporting to Spain

TEHRAN - Mohammad Taheri, President of the Iran-Spain Joint Chamber of Commerce, emphasizes the internal and external barriers to expanding exports to Spain, noting that addressing these challenges could lead to a promising future in bilateral relations.

In an interview, Mohammad Taheri, President of the Iran-Spain Joint Chamber of Commerce, highlighted the dual nature of challenges facing Iranian exports to Spain: internal obstacles within Iran and external constraints tied to European regulations. He stressed that overcoming these challenges is key to fostering sustainable trade relations between the two countries.

According to recent customs data, Iran's exports to Spain mainly include bitumen, saffron, hand-woven carpets, pistachios, and shrimp. While these products hold traditional value, Taheri pointed out their lack of diversity in terms of added value, technology, and consumer market scope. He called for a strategic overhaul of Iran's export basket to better align with Spain's market needs.

Comparative studies conducted by the Joint Chamber have identified significant untapped potential in sectors such as creative industries, high-tech and knowledge-based products, herbal medicines and export-oriented teas, industrial design, renewable energy technologies, and technical-engineering services. Taheri highlighted Spain's appetite for culturally diverse and Eastern-inspired designs, suggesting that Iranian consulting, architecture, and interior design services could serve as a competitive edge.

However, he added that realizing these opportunities requires well-defined operational strategies, product standardization, competitive branding for the European market, and stronger institutional ties with specialized Spanish organizations.

Exports to Spain face two main types of structural barriers: Inefficient and costly transportation systems; Lack of internationally



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

recognized insurance options; Limited export incentives; Difficulties in financial transactions; Fragmented licensing processes and absence of a one-stop export services authority; Restrictions on opening letters of credit due to sanctions; Complex EU regulations, including compliance with CE Mark standards; technical and tariff barriers for non-European goods; and Poor media representation and lack of a professional brand image for Iranian products

Taheri emphasized the need for a policy shift toward supporting high-value non-oil exports. He identified collaboration with European institutions, particularly ICEX (Spain's national export and investment agency), as a strategic priority. ICEX currently offers targeted support to Spanish firms entering the Middle Eastern market, and Iran should seek reciprocal access.

Taheri called on government entities to: Establish a dedicated Europe Trade Desk; Revise incentive policies for hard-to-access markets; Create a unified export licensing window; and Support international digital branding platforms.

He also advocated for Specialized trade guarantee funds for Europe; Improved joint logistical infrastructure; Coordination among ministries, the Trade Promotion Organization, Iran Chamber of Commerce, and joint chambers; and Strategic Engagement by the Iran-Spain Chamber; To advance trade ties, the Iran-Spain Chamber is actively moving beyond traditional methods. Initiatives include dispatching specialized trade delegations to Spain to engage with associations, regional chambers, buyers, and government bodies.

The Chamber has also drafted regulations to establish expert working groups, guiding members toward actionable internationalization strategies. Ongoing programs include:

## New Trade Avenues Between Iran and India Explored at Iran Expo 2025



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - During the "Iran-India Trade Opportunities and Capacities" conference held on the sidelines of Iran Expo 2025, participants emphasized the need for Iranian traders to familiarize themselves with international trade models and highlighted mutual interest in expanding commercial exchanges between the two nations.

According to the Iran Trade Promotion Organization, the event featured key figures including Hossein Bamiri, Commercial Attaché of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Khalid Khan, a member of the Iran Trade Center in Mumbai, and several trade delegations from both countries.

At the start of the conference, Bamiri discussed the nature of exports between Iran and India, noting that over the past decade, Iran's exports to India have been largely limited to a narrow range of goods such as dates, pistachios, almonds, and petrochemical products. He pointed out the lack of diversity in Iran's export portfolio.

Bamiri emphasized that current trade volumes do not match the commercial potential of the two countries. He stated that, in addition to consumer goods, Iran should also consider exporting services to India. Achieving this, he said, would require greater participation of Iranian traders in international exhibitions.

The Iranian Commercial Attaché in India added that Iranian entrepreneurs and manufacturers must globalize their business structures and become well-versed in international trade practices. He stressed the importance of effective marketing and consistent annual participation in international trade events.

Khalid Khan, representing the Iran Trade Center in Mumbai, expressed the aim of ushering in a new era of trade relations between Iran and India and sharing the strengths of both nations more broadly.

He also emphasized that expanding trade through the Chabahar Port is a key possibility if Indian traders gain access. He noted that this would require sound policy decisions and proper timing.

## Iran Eyes \$20b in Exports to Iraq in Coming Years



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran is poised to significantly boost its trade with neighboring Iraq, potentially reaching \$20 billion annually in the coming years, according to Yahya Al-e Es'haq, President of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce.

Speaking on the sidelines of Iran Expo 2025 in Tehran, Al-e Es'haq highlighted the strategic nature of the economic relationship between the two countries, noting that last year's official exports from Iran to Iraq amounted to around \$12 billion.

"We believe it is entirely feasible to increase this figure to \$20 billion in the years ahead," he stated. He emphasized the critical role of trade exhibitions and business delegations—particularly in the Iraqi market—in achieving this target.

This year, Iraq has sent the largest delegation to the exhibition, with about 300 professional guests, including key figures from the country's economic and political sectors. The delegation includes chamber of commerce officials, company representatives, economic policymakers, heads of investment councils, and deputy ministers from Iraq's economy and oil sectors, as well as provincial governors.

Al-e Es'haq also noted that bilateral meetings were held between Iraqi traders and Iranian officials, including discussions organized by the Tehran Chamber of Commerce with governors of Iranian provinces bordering Iraq.

He reiterated that Iraq remains Iran's largest trade partner and said there are opportunities to expand exports across various sectors—from technical and engineering services to hygiene products, construction materials, and IT solutions.

Additionally, he described Iraq as a promising market for Iranian agricultural products and food industries, expressing hope that such trade would further deepen the two nations' economic ties.

The 7th Iran Expo opened on April 27 in Tehran with participation from 2,000 companies and traders representing more than 100 countries. The event runs through May 1.



## U.S. State Dept. Approves \$3.5b Missile Sale to Saudi Arabia

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. State Department approved a possible foreign military sale to Saudi Arabia of AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles and related support for \$3.5 billion, the Pentagon said in a statement. The U.S. is poised to offer Saudi Arabia an arms package worth well over \$100 billion during U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to the kingdom in May.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia requested 1,000 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM), 50 AMRAAM guidance sections and other equipment including spares, missile containers, and spare parts, and logistics support services. The Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency notified Congress of the possible sale on Friday.



## Major Offshore Quake Causes Tsunami Scare in Chile, Argentina



SANTIAGO (Dispatches) - A strong offshore earthquake caused a tsunami scare in the far south of Chile and Argentina on Friday, with authorities evacuating residents of coastal areas for hours before scaling back the threat level.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) said the quake struck in the Drake Passage between the southern tip of South America and Antarctica at a shallow depth of 10 kilometers (6.2 miles).

The USGS put the magnitude at 7.4, slightly below the 7.5 reported by Chile's National Seismological Center.

It struck at 9:58 am local time (1258 GMT), and several smaller aftershocks were also recorded, but there were no reports of injuries or material damage.

The epicenter was 219 kilometers from the city of Ushuaia in Argentina and a similar distance from the Chilean town of Puerto Williams.

Chile's emergency agency Senapred issued a tsunami warning and ordered the evacuation of coastal areas of the remote southern Magallanes region.

But within two hours, the agency had lifted the evacuation order.

"The preventive evacuation is over. That means everyone can return and resume their activities," Juan Carlos Andrade, Senapred's director in Magallanes, said, while adding that fishing was suspended until further notice.

Situated at the southern tip of South America, the Magallanes region is Chile's second largest but is sparsely populated.

It lies adjacent to Argentina's Tierra del Fuego Province, home to Ushuaia, a major jump-off point for expeditions to the Antarctic.



## Syria Slams Israeli Damascus Strike as Dangerous Escalation

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria's Islamist rulers on Friday denounced an air strike near the presidential palace as a "dangerous escalation", as Israel called it a "clear message" not to harm the Druze minority.

The dawn strike came hours after senior Druze clerics and armed factions reaffirmed their loyalty to Damascus and rejected any call for secession.

They also urged the authorities to appoint local officials to government posts in the Druze heartland in Sweida province.

The statement followed sectarian clashes between Druze fighters and Syrian forces, including government-affiliated groups.

More than 100 people were killed in Jaramana and Sahnaya near Damascus and in Sweida, war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Friday's explosion from the presidential palace area was heard across Damascus, an AFP correspondent reported.

Israeli military spokesman Avichay Adraee said "warplanes attacked... the area near Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa's palace in Damascus", referring to the interim president.

In a joint statement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Israel Katz called it a "clear message" to Syria's new rulers.

"We will not allow forces to be sent south of Damascus or any threat to the Druze community," they said.

Syria's presidency called the strike "a dangerous escalation against state institutions", and accused Israel of destabilising the country.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the Israeli strike as a violation of Syria's sovereignty, which he said Israel must respect along with "its unity, its territorial integrity and its independence", his spokesman said.

After this week's sectarian clashes a de-escalation deal was agreed between Druze representatives and the government,

prompting troop deployments in Sahnaya and tighter security around Jaramana.

Syrian officials said the agreement also included the immediate surrender of heavy weapons.

An AFP photographer saw troops taking over checkpoints from Druze gunmen in Jaramana, although no handover of weapons was witnessed.

Qatar, a main backer of Syria's new rulers, called Friday's Israeli air strike "blatant aggression against the sovereignty" of the country.

A German foreign ministry statement said "Syria must not become the venue for regional tensions to be played out".

A 55-year-old who asked to be identified only as Ahmed said Friday's blast woke his family.

"Unfortunately, we have gotten used to explosions and Israeli strikes in Damascus. Curse them," he said.

Israel has attacked hundreds of military sites since Islamist-led forces deposed longtime president Bashar al-Assad in December.

It has also sent troops into the demilitarised buffer zone that used to separate Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights.

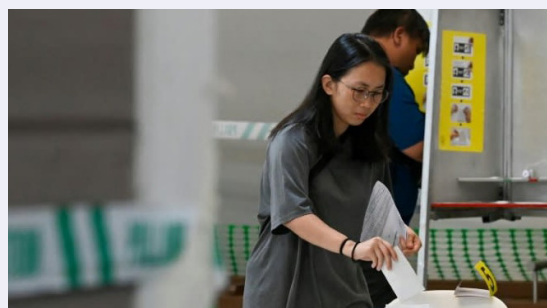
On Wednesday, Israel launched strikes near Damascus and threatened more if violence against the Druze continued.

The unrest inside Syria was sparked by the circulation of an audio recording attributed to a Druze citizen and deemed blasphemous. AFP was unable to confirm its authenticity.

Syria's government said "outlaw groups" were behind the violence, but the Observatory and Druze residents said forces affiliated with the new authorities attacked Jaramana and Sahnaya and clashed with Druze gunmen.

"The situation is calm, but we are scared. Everyone is terrified," 35-year-old housewife Arij told AFP, adding that many Christians and Druze "have fled to Damascus".

## Singapore Votes With New PM Seeking Strong Mandate Amid Tariff Turmoil



SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - Singaporeans cast their votes Saturday in an election where Prime Minister Lawrence Wong faces his first major test against a rejuvenated opposition in uncertain economic times for the trade-centered nation.

Wong's ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which has steered the island to prosperity while using an iron hand to suppress dissent, is expected to easily retain a clear majority in parliament.

Popular after leading Singapore's Covid task force, Wong took over last year from his predecessor Lee Hsien Loong, the son of founding premier Lee Kuan Yew who ruled the island state after its bitter break-up with Malaysia in 1965.

Wong has repeatedly said he needed a strong mandate to navigate heavily trade-reliant Singapore through economic uncertainty in light of tariffs levied by US President Donald Trump.

He has warned Singapore would be hit hard if Trump went ahead with the tariffs he announced and then paused for most countries, except China, and needed to stay open and competitive to counter their effects.

"So I say to all Singaporeans, please consider carefully. This is not a gamble. This is your family, your future, our Singapore," he said during the campaign.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. officials have finalized new economic sanctions against Russia, including banking and energy measures, to intensify pressure on Moscow to embrace U.S. President Donald Trump's efforts to end its war on Ukraine, according to three U.S. officials and a source familiar with the issue.

The targets include state-owned Russian energy giant Gazprom and major entities involved in the natural resources and banking sectors, said an administration official, who like the other sources requested anonymity to discuss the issue.

The official provided no further details.

It was far from clear, however, whether the package will be approved by Trump, whose sympathy for Moscow's statements and actions have given way to frustration with Russian President Vladimir Putin's spurning of his calls for a ceasefire and peace talks.

The U.S. National Security Council "is trying to coordinate some set of more punitive actions against Russia," said the source familiar with the issue. "This will have to be signed off by Trump."

"It's totally his call," confirmed a second U.S. official.

"From the beginning, the president has been clear about his commitment to achieving a full and comprehensive ceasefire," said National Security Council Spokesman James Hewitt. "We do not comment on the details of ongoing negotiations."

The U.S. Treasury, which implements most U.S. sanctions, did not respond to a request for comment.

An approval by Trump of new sanctions, which would follow the Wednesday signing of a U.S.-Ukraine minerals deal that he heavily promoted as part of his peace effort, could signify a hardening of his stance towards the Kremlin.

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the United States and its allies have added layer upon layer of sanctions on the country. While the measures have been painful for Russia's economy,

## U.S. Readies Russia Sanctions Over Ukraine, Unclear If Trump Will Sign



Moscow has found ways to circumvent the sanctions and continue funding its war.

Trump "has been bending over backwards to give Putin every opportunity to say, 'Okay, we're going to have a ceasefire and an end to the war,' and Putin keeps rejecting him," said Kurt Volker, a former U.S. envoy to NATO who was U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations during Trump's first term. "This is the next phase of putting some pressure on Russia."

"Putin has been escalating," he continued. Trump "has got the U.S. and Ukraine now in alignment calling for an immediate and full ceasefire, and Putin is now the outlier."

Since assuming office in January, Trump has taken steps seen as aimed at boosting Russian acceptance of his peace effort, including disbanding a Justice Department task force formed to enforce sanctions and target oligarchs close to the Kremlin.

He also has made pro-Moscow statements, falsely blaming Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for starting the conflict and calling him a "dictator."

Meanwhile, Steve Witkoff, Trump's special envoy, has advocated a peace strategy that would cede four Ukrainian regions to Moscow, and has met Putin four times, most recently last week.

But three days after that meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Putin's maximalist demands for a settlement and Moscow's forces have pressed frontline attacks and missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities, claiming more civilian casualties.

Reuters reported in March that the United States was drawing up a plan to potentially give Russia sanctions relief but Trump in recent weeks has expressed frustration with Putin's foot-dragging on ending the invasion and last Saturday held a "very productive" one-on-one meeting in the Vatican with Zelenskyy.

The next day, Trump said in a post on his Truth Social platform that he was "strongly considering large scale Banking Sanctions, Sanctions and Tariffs on Russia" that would remain until a ceasefire and final peace deal.

Volker said that Russia has been earning hard currency that funds its military through oil and gas sales to countries like India and China and that it would be "very significant" if Trump slapped secondary sanctions on such deals.

Secondary sanctions are those where one country seeks to punish a second country for trading with a third by barring access to its own market, a particularly powerful tool for the United States because of the size of its economy.

## Germany Move Against Far-Right AfD Sets Off U.S. Quarrel

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany's domestic intelligence service on Friday designated the far-right AfD party as an extremist group, setting off a diplomatic spat with the United States.

The BfV intelligence agency, which had already designated several local branches of the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) as right-wing extremists, said it moved against the entire party due to its attempts to "undermine the free, democratic" order in Germany.

The classification gives authorities greater powers to monitor the party by lowering the barriers for such steps as intercepting telephone calls and deploying undercover agents.

The conservative US administration quickly condemned the move.

US Vice President JD Vance on Friday accused Germany of rebuilding a "Berlin Wall".

"The West tore down the Berlin Wall together. And it has been rebuilt -- not by the Soviets or the Russians, but by the German establishment," Vance, who in February defiantly met the AfD leader in Munich, wrote on X. He said the AfD was "the most



popular party in Germany".

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called it "tyranny in disguise" and said "Germany should reverse course". President Donald Trump's billionaire advisor Elon Musk has also previously defended the AfD.

The German foreign ministry took the unusual step of replying directly to Rubio on X to say: "This is democracy."

The ministry said that the "decision is the result of a thorough and independent investigation to protect our constitution" and could be appealed.

"We have learnt from our history that right-wing extremism needs to be stopped," the ministry said.

The AfD slammed the move as a "heavy blow" to democracy, just months after they came second in a national election. It vowed to mount a legal challenge.

The designation revived calls to ban the party in Germany ahead of conservative Friedrich Merz becoming chancellor next Tuesday, leading a coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD).





MADRID (Dispatches) - Norwegian Casper Ruud did not let a rib injury get in the way of setting up a Madrid Open final showdown with fifth seed Jack Draper as he reached the title match without dropping a set following a 6-4 7-5 win over Francisco Cerundolo.

Ruud, who ousted Taylor Fritz and Daniil Medvedev in the previous rounds, needed treatment three games into the opening set while he managed to stave off 15 of the 18 break points he faced against the Argentine to move into his third Masters 1000 final.

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He will face a red-hot Draper, who advanced to his third final of the season with a 6-3 7-6(4) win over Italy's Lorenzo Musetti.

Currently ranked world number 15, Ruud is set to break into the top 10 once again but his plans very nearly fell apart as the match got underway.

"I wasn't sure I was going to be able to finish the match, honestly. I felt something in my rib during the warm-up, just towards the end before going out (on court)," Ruud said.

"I felt it in nearly every shot, especially the serve. Luckily, I got some quick treatment on it. There's

not too much you can do, you only have three minutes (with the physio). So I will go and check it out more now."

Ruud said he had a couple of painkillers and started feeling better once the adrenaline kicked in.

"Hopefully it's nothing too bad, it was quite sharp," Ruud added. "Not an ideal start, but I managed to keep it together and play some really good tennis when I had to."

Sunday will be Ruud's 18th final on clay, with only Novak Djokovic among the active players who have reached more finals (34) on the surface.

Britain's Draper also reached the final without dropping a set and now holds four consecutive wins over Musetti.

"We played a few times in the juniors. It's so nice to play with someone you've grown up with and both to be living out your dreams on the biggest courts," the 23-year-old said.

"Casper is such an experienced player. Someone who's made Grand Slam finals... two on the clay at Roland Garros. I have to bring my A game for sure."

Draper will break into the top five in the world rankings following his impressive run in Madrid, as he chases a second Masters 1000 crown following his triumph at Indian Wells earlier this season.

## De Bruyne Strike Hands Man City Win Over Wolves

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Captain Kevin De Bruyne scored in his penultimate game at Etihad Stadium as Manchester City beat Wolverhampton Wanderers 1-0 to climb to third in the Premier League and boost their chances of Champions League qualification.

Pep Guardiola's men, who are unbeaten in seven successive league games, provisionally climbed one spot with 64 points after 35 games, two points ahead of fourth-placed Newcastle and four points ahead of both Chelsea and Nottingham Forest, who all have a game in hand.

"We are better than weeks ago, winning games in a row," Guardiola told Sky Sports. "It's good to win when we play the way we played today, but we cannot relax — Southampton, Bournemouth, and Fulham (left to play)."

Wolves, who saw their remarkable run of six successive victories end, are 13th.

Wolves had the better chances in a nervy first half before City broke the deadlock in the 35th minute when Jeremy Doku worked the ball down the left before cutting it back sharply from the left-hand side to De Bruyne who side-footed it home past Jose Sa.

The stadium crowd rose to chant "Oh, Kevin De Bruyne!" in an emotional moment. The 33-year-old announced last month that he would leave the club when his contract expires at the end of the season, making Friday his second-last game at his home stadium in a sky-blue City shirt.

"I know I have one game left here but I just try to do my job like



I've always done and I did that today, so I'm proud of what I'm doing and that's how it's supposed to be," the Belgian told Sky Sports.

De Bruyne, who has battled injuries the past two seasons, had expressed surprise that he had not been offered a contract extension by City, saying he still had plenty to give. Friday was another example.

"A lot of teammates have said that it's sad I have to go too but that's just how it goes sometimes in life and I think the way I'm performing and acting like a teammate ... I give everything and I want to win the game."

Asked about his future, De Bruyne said: "Unfortunately, I don't know yet, I think I showed that I can still play, otherwise I don't do what I do these last four or five weeks."

De Bruyne's goal ended some nervous moments including an absolute sitter missed by Wolves in the first half when Jean-Ricner Bellegarde slid a square pass to Marshall Munetsi rather than take the shot, but his pass was just out of Munetsi's reach.

Nervous City fans had barely had a chance to catch their breath when Rayan Ait-Nouri had a double chance for the visitors, rifling his first off the post and then having his follow-up effort cleared off the line by Josko Gvardiol.

City stepped it up soon after and 20-year-old Nico O'Reilly unleashed a shot that was deflected just past the post.

Wolves, however, did not take their foot off the gas and Matheus Cunha hammered a shot off the upright early in the second half.

"I am very proud of my team," Wolves boss Vitor Pereira said. "I said that we can lose a game, but we can't lose our identity, our courage, our ambition, our commitment and our team spirit.

"Today we showed all of that in our team. We were just missing the result."

## Alonso Quiet on Leverkusen Future Amid Real Madrid Links

MADRID (Dispatches) - Xabi Alonso kept his cards close to his chest when questioned about his future as Bayer Leverkusen boss as the Spaniard on Friday declined to comment on reports linking him to the Real Madrid job.

Spanish media have reported that Alonso is a frontrunner to replace Carlo Ancelotti at Real if the Italian leaves the LaLiga club after a poor season despite having one more year on his contract.

Alonso previously played under Ancelotti at Real, where he spent five seasons, helping the Spanish club win the Champions League after a gap of 12 years before moving to Bayern Munich. "My future? Nothing new to say, the answer remains the same. We have to wait," Alonso told reporters ahead of Sunday's trip to Freiburg.

"Communication with the club is still good. There is clarity between everyone."



Alonso became hot property last season when he guided Leverkusen to an unbeaten Bundesliga season as they won their first league title in the club's history while also lifting the German Cup and reaching the Europa League final.

Although Leverkusen have not been able to defend their title in the same dominant fashion, with leaders Bayern Munich one win away from being crowned champions, Alonso still hopes to complete a memorable season.

"It's still the second-best season in the club's history and we want to continue pursuing this goal," he said.

Leverkusen play a Freiburg side who are fourth in the standings and fighting for Champions League spots.

"They have that chance and they will certainly be extra motivated. But that's not a problem for us because it also motivates us a lot when we know that the opposing team is determined to beat us," Alonso said.

## Popovich Steps Down as Spurs Coach



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Gregg Popovich has stepped down as coach of the San Antonio Spurs and will become the club's president of basketball operations, the NBA team said.

The 76-year-old, who has the most wins by any coach in NBA history, suffered a mild stroke last November and did not return during the remainder of the season.

"While my love and passion for the game remain, I've decided it's time to step away as head coach," said Popovich.

"I'm forever grateful to the wonderful players, coaches, staff and fans who allowed me to serve them as the Spurs head coach and am excited for the opportunity to continue to support the organization, community and city that are so meaningful to me."

The Spurs said Mitch Johnson, who served as acting head coach after Popovich took a leave of absence following his stroke, would take over as head coach. Terms of the contract were not announced.

Popovich is a three-time NBA coach of the year who led the Spurs to five championships and directed the U.S. men's team to a gold medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. He was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame as a coach in 2023.

Popovich first joined the Spurs in 1988 as an assistant coach, a role he held for four seasons, before taking a job as an assistant coach with Golden State for two seasons.

In 1994, Popovich returned to the Spurs as the team's general manager and vice president of basketball operations.

After a 3-15 start to the 1996-97 season, Popovich took over the head coaching role after firing Bob Hill and went on to turn the Spurs into one of the NBA's most successful franchises.

"Coach Pop's extraordinary impact on our family, San Antonio, the Spurs and the game of basketball is profound," said Spurs Managing Partner Peter J. Holt.

"His accolades and awards don't do justice to the impact he has had on so many people. He is truly one-of-one as a person, leader and coach."

## Piastri on Top in Miami Grand Prix Practice



MIAMI (Dispatches) - Formula One championship leader Oscar Piastri was fastest in sole practice for the Miami Grand Prix while McLaren teammate Lando Norris had to pit and jettison tools left in his car.

The Australian, chasing a third win in a row on Sunday, lapped on the quickest soft tyres with a best time one minute 27.128 seconds with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc next best but 0.356 slower.

Red Bull's reigning champion Max Verstappen, arriving in Miami after celebrating the birth of his first child with partner Kelly Piquet, was third quickest and 0.430 off the leading pace.

The Miami round is a sprint weekend, with qualifying for the Saturday 100km race later on Friday instead of a second practice session.

Norris, last year's Miami winner who lost the championship lead to Piastri in Saudi Arabia two weeks' ago, was only 12th on the timesheets after red flags prevented him completing a lap on soft tyres.

He had to pit earlier after he found tools, including a torch, left in the cockpit when he took to the track for his first lap.

Stewards said they were investigating the team for releasing the car in an apparently unsafe condition, with the risk of a fine.

The session was stopped with four minutes remaining after Haas rookie Ollie Bearman hit the wall at Turn 12, before some drivers had completed quick laps on the soft tyres.

"I'm fine, sorry," said the Briton.

Norris and Haas's Esteban Ocon had earlier had a near-miss when the McLaren came up fast on the Frenchman going slow on the racing line at the end of the straight. That incident was also being investigated.

Williams' Carlos Sainz was fourth with teammate Alex Albon fifth and Racing Bulls rookie Isack Hadjar sixth.