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Iran seeks irreversible end to Syria war in Astana

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© AFP

Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan, hosts two-day Syria peace talks which started on January 23, 2017.

Tehran says not favoring persisting deadlock with Riyadh

TT POLITICS desk

TEHRAN – Iran's Foreign Ministry has announced that despite the fact that Saudi Arabia is pressing ahead with its hostile political approach toward Tehran, Iran doesn't favor "eternally" troubled relations with the Muslim country.

"We don't intend to have any problem with our neighbors and Saudi Arabia. Nor do we intend to have no relations with them," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi in a press conference in Tehran on Monday.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have had no diplomatic relations since January 2015 as Riyadh summoned its diplomats from Tehran after its diplomatic posts in the capital Tehran and Mashhad were stormed by an angry mob.

The attack came as a retaliation for the country executing a prominent Shiite cleric critical of the policies of the House of Saud.

Disagreements over a hajj crush in Mina during which more than 464 Iranian nationals were killed have further complicated the situation, already strained over the Syrian crisis.

Mediation efforts by regional and international actors have failed to ease the tension.

Iran has reiterated that it is open to a détente provided that the Saudi side shifts to a positive political posture.

"If Saudi Arabia makes serious changes to its behavior toward Iran, and we perceive it, then, it can open the way for other issues," Qassemi underscored.

Foreign investment MOUs worth $3b signed

TT ECONOMY desk

TEHRAN — Seven memorandums of understanding, valued at $3 billion, were signed on Monday to attract foreign investment for a couple of projects on the Mokran coasts, south-eastern Iran.

As per the agreements, investors from China, Oman, India and South Korea will participate in the projects.

The signing ceremony was held on the sidelines of the 1st international summit for presenting Mokran investment opportunities, IRNA reported.

As Mehr news agency reported on Saturday, 35 Iranian holdings and representatives from 20 countries namely France, Japan, South Korea, China, Germany, Russia, Norway, India, Slovakia, Lebanon, Finland, Bangladesh, Spain, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, The Netherlands, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Sweden are taking part in the two-day event to get familiar with projects and investment opportunities in the strategic coastal area of Iran.

Finance and Economic Affairs Minister Ali Tayyebnia said in December that the country welcomes foreign investment and offers investors with a variety of incentives.

According to the official, a 20-year tax exemption and easy visa-free residency are among advantages awarded to foreign investors in Iran's free zones.

'Minus-Iran' Muslim alliance impossible: report

A leading Pakistani newspaper believes that no military coalition of Muslim countries can achieve its targets without Iran being part of it, according to IRNA on Monday.

Daily 'Express Tribune' in its editorial comments said that the stated primary objective of the newly formed joint force is to protect the Muslim countries from all terrorist groups and terrorist organizations but would this be possible with Iran, Iraq and Syria not being part of this coalition?

The Pakistani daily was commenting on a so-called military alliance recently formed by the Saudi regime to allegedly protect Muslim states from terrorist attacks.

A former Pakistani military chief is reported to lead the so-called allaince.

When reports came that Pakistan former army chief Gen (retd) Raheel Shareef had been offered the job of leading the joint force put together by Saudi Arabia and he had accepted the offer, definitely affect our 'policy of neutrality' towards Saudi Arabia and Iran given that all 34 members of the coalition are Sunni majority nation.

"Is there not this sectarian shade in this military alliance given the 100 per cent Sunni dominance of the countries that constitute the alliance?" it asked.

"The alliance is also expected to deploy military forces in Syria to fight Daesh as is being felt universally in Pakistan such a development would be a great military mistake," it viewed.

It said Pakistan and Saudi Arabia enjoy a longstanding relationship particularly in the field of defense. However, their ties saw an unprecedented hiccup last year when parliament refused to allow Pakistani troops to join the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen.

The newspaper said that statement by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa during a meeting with Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, Abdullah Marzouk Al-Zahrani that Pakistan Army held the defense of Saudi Arabia "at par with its own" –can have no more than rhetorical value.

Trump will look fool if he pulls out of international nuclear deal: Lendman

INTERVIEW
By Javad Heirannia

TEHRAN — U.S. columnist Stephen Lendman says the new U.S. President Donald Trump will look stupid if he withdraws from the nuclear deal because it is an "international treaty".

Signatories to the nuclear deal, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), marked its one-year anniversary just recently.

The deal, signed between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, has been endorsed by the UN Resolution 2231.

"JCPOA is an international treaty. Trump will look like a fool if he pulls out," Stephen tells the Tehran Times.

Following is the text of the interview:

■ Trump has used threatening and even contradictory language about the nuclear deal. What's going on in his mind?

A: JCPOA is an international treaty. Trump will look like a fool if he pulls out. I doubt he'll do it, but, like Obama, he can breach it by imposing more sanctions, keeping Iranian assets frozen and maintaining hostile relations. I suspect this is what he'll do. If so, I'll strongly criticize him.

■ Why is Trump against the Trans Pacific Partnership trade pact?

A: Trump wants more jobs created at home, wanting offshoring them to stop. That's why he's against TPP and similar trade deals. At the same time, he's strongly for free trade. I suspect he'll compromise on these deals to please corporate America.

I'm concerned about what he's said about China and Iran. A Sino/Russia alliance can match America's strength economically and militarily. Trump can't have better relations with Russia by antagonizing China and Iran. I hope his governance will be more responsible than his rhetoric.

■ Isn't the contact between Trump and Taiwan's leader in contrast to Washington's one-China policy?

A: I consider taking a phone call from Taiwan's leader a minor issue. I'm concerned he uses the one China policy as a bargaining chip. Beijing won't tolerate it. I don't know what he'll do but I'm worried.

■ What is your prediction of the quality of relations between the United States and NATO under Trump?

A: It's important to follow what politicians do, not what they say. Obama broke every major promise he made, including to Iran, breaching the JCPOA by imposing new sanctions after its implementation. →13

Iran and Saudi Arabia struggle to reconcile differences

Hassan Rouhani, Iran's president, confirmed that ten countries will attempt to smooth over the differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Rouhani stated that he wanted to see a change in Saudi Arabia's policies toward the region. Saudi Arabia has said the same thing about Iran. If the two countries break the ice, however, the result could be a new, more positive, chapter for the Middle East

Hussein Rorian, an expert on Iranian affairs, told DW that the Iranian position "has been repeated by the Secretary of the Supreme National Council Ali Shamkhani, President Rouhani, and just recently Foreign Minister Javad Zarif."

Iraq and Kuwait, two countries who themselves fought in the past, could be some of the mediators between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Talking in a press conference last week, Rouhani said, "There are many countries that want to help us settle our differences with Saudi Arabia. Iraq and Kuwait were mentioned, but there are also 8 to 10 other countries willing to help."

He also said that Iran does not want to exclude Saudi Arabia from the politics of the region and will even provide economic assistance to Riyadh but only "if they made the right decision." By this he means Saudi Arabia ending its military intervention in Yemen. He also is calling for an end to Saudi Arabia meddling in the affairs of Bahrain.

An Iranian official also confirmed that Saudi Arabia was willing to negotiate arrangements for the Hajj pilgrimage. →13

© Fars/ Soheil Sahranavard

Thespians perform a street theater during the 35th Fajr International Theater Festival in the courtyard of Tehran's City Theater Complex on January 22, 2017. Street performances are warmly received by theatergoers during the event every year.

HRW warns new executions may occur in Bahrain in unfair trials

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has warned that the Manama regime authorities may execute two more Bahrainis after "unfair" trials and based on confessions extracted under torture.

HRW said on Monday that the Manama regime may be about to enforce death sentences against activists Mohamed Ramadhan Issa and Hussain Ali Moosa.

Bahrain's Court of Cassation upheld the death sentences against the two in 2015, accusing them of killing a policeman in a bomb explosion in the village of al-Dair in February 2014.

HRW said that the recent execution of three other Bahraini activists in a similar case raised concerns that King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah would approve the executions of Ramadhan and Moosa as well.

Bahrain carried out the executions of Shia activists Sami Mushaima, Abbas Jamil Tahir al-Sami', and Ali Abdulshahid al-Singace on January 15. The Court of Cassation had similarly upheld the death penalties given to the three over allegations of killing an Emirati security forces in al-Daih in Bahrain in March 2014. Emirati forces have been deployed to Bahrain to help the regime crack down on political dissent.

The defendants had denied the charge.

The international rights group said the confessions of Ramadhan and Moosa, which had been extracted under torture and which both men had retracted, were used as evidence in a trial that violated international judicial standards.

"Bahrain should not under any circumstances execute two more young men, especially where there is credible evidence of confessions obtained through torture and unsound convictions," said HRW's deputy Middle East director, Joe Stork.

Stork also urged the UK, France, Germany, and the EU to "publicly condemn this unfair trial and oppose these sentences before Bahrain assembles its firing squad." →13

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

Russia will prevent Trump from discarding JCPOA: ambassador

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Russia will try to prevent U.S. President Donald Trump from tearing up the JCPOA, Russia's ambassador to Tehran told the Hamshahri newspaper in an interview published on Monday.

"We have never left, nor will ever leave Iran alone," Levan Dzhagaryan said, adding, "When Western countries imposed one-sided sanctions on Iran we objected and did not follow. We announced that unilateral sanctions are illegal."

"Now a new chapter has been opened and we hope the JCPOA is supported by the U.S. and others."

Top general urges non-stop military preparedness

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces called on the Army Ground Force on Monday to boost preparedness constantly and keep pace with new technologies in the military field.

Major General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri stressed that the armed forces should maintain such a high degree of readiness that the enemies would not dare think of attacking Iran, Mehr reported.

"We should not neglect to boost the country's defense power even for a moment," Major General Baqeri stressed.

IRGC Ground Force stages war game in western Iran

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The IRGC Ground Force started military exercises in the western parts of Iran on Monday, its commander said.

"The military drills code-named Imam Ali (AS) started today and will last for four days," Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour said, Tasnim reported.

He said improvement of military capabilities of the IRGC Ground Force and development of new methods of warfare are among the main objectives of the exercises.

Special parliamentary committee to investigate Plasco incident

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — A special committee of parliamentarians from the Tehran constituency will investigate the collapse of the 17th-story Plasco building in a huge inferno on January 19, top MP Mohammad Reza Aref said on Monday.

"We will hold sessions with organizations which are engaged with the incident and review their measures," Aref stated, Mehr reported.

Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli also said on Monday that a special committee of ministers has decided to launch operations to identify vulnerable buildings similar to Plasco and include them in a list of buildings in need of structural reinforcement.

New political group announces formation

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The Front for Development, Welfare, and Justice announced its formation on Monday, ISNA reported.

Among the members are Mohammad Javad Mohammadi Nouri, secretary general of the Islamic Revolution Youth Society; Fereydoon Ghadiri Abyaneh, secretary general of the Islamic Association of Italy Graduates; Ali Keyhanian, secretary general of the Society of the Islamic Revolution Supporters; Mohammad Mirbaqeri, secretary general of the Forum of Islamic Thought and Unity; Khalil Ali Mohammadzadeh, secretary general of the Iranian Nation Welfare Party; and Qolamreza Mehrabdollahi, secretary general of the Islamic Association of Engineers.

Interior Ministry prepared for a mid-term Assembly election

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The Interior Ministry is prepared in case of an order for a mid-term Assembly of Experts election, Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli said on Monday.

He said if the assembly members decide to hold a mid-term election, the ministry will prepare the grounds for holding it on the same day as presidential election, ILNA reported.

He also stressed that it is important that the elections be secured against any illegal action, stating, "We should make sure the elections are healthy."

Iran seeks irreversible end to Syria war in Astana

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — A top Iranian diplomat said in a speech on Monday that the inter-Syrian peace talks in Astana must result in an "irreversible cessation of hostilities."

"The utmost goal of our joint efforts to end the Syrian conflict must be an irreversible cessation of hostilities..." Hossein Jaberi Ansari, who heads the Iranian team in the negotiations, told an opening session of the two-day political drive in the Kazak capital.

"Today, we have assembled in Astana to re-orient our endeavor towards peace and to remedy the shortcomings of past processes, in order to help a dialogue between the Syrian government and the Syrian armed opposition groups," he noted.

Following is the full text of his speech at the event:

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful

Your Excellency, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, the honorable Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Distinguished heads and members of participating delegations

Ladies and Gentlemen

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to the great nation and state of Kazakhstan, and to appreciate their warm hospitality towards the participating delegations.

Once in Kazakhstan, the homeland of Farabi, we feel at home and we regard the decision of Kazakh brotherly government and nation to host this conference in line with Islamic teachings to help our brothers.

As we are sitting here in comfort; men, women and children in Syria are struggling with difficulties, agony and ravages of war, terrorism and displacement within or out of their homeland. In some parts, including Damascus, they are even deprived of drinking water.

As an Iranian, I can feel their misery. It was not long ago when Iran fell victim of an imposed war that left hundreds of thousands of martyrs, wounded and displaced people and led to destruction of vast areas of the country.

Everybody in my accompanying delegation have lived those days.

In the human world, the divergence of beliefs and interests are natural, but war is the ugliest manifestation of such disagreement. The utmost goal of our joint efforts to end the Syrian conflict must be an irreversible cessation of hostilities that enables the people of Syria to get back to the normal life they deserve, like any other nation. Syrians shall enjoy a sovereign state in an integrated territory within safe borders.

All nations shall enjoy the inherent right of self-determination and no external powers should or can interfere with the right of people. Syrian nation is no exception and shall exercise this

Iran's Jaberi Ansari talking to UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura (L) on the sidelines of the Syria talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Jan. 23, 2017.

right of theirs, free from any external pressure. Those who seek the prolongation of the Syrian crisis for their own interests hinder the fulfillment of people's right.

Dear colleagues

Today, we have assembled in Astana to re-orient our endeavor towards peace and to remedy the shortcomings of past processes, in order to help a dialogue between the Syrian government and the Syrian armed opposition groups who have joined the process of current talks, in framework of tripartite initiative consisting of Russia, Turkey and Iran, to win an agreement on the eventual political solution.

To this end, we need to have a clear road map. Specifically, all participating parties to these talks need to denounce acts of violence and respect not only the ceasefire, but cessation of all kind of hostilities. We shall welcome the adherence of non-participating groups to this process, once they abide by principle of non-violence.

The international community should join efforts to curb the illegal transfer of arms, financial aids and fighters into Syria that enables the terrorist groups to continue suppressing the local population and commencing chains of armed confrontations anywhere in the country. An effective mechanism of ceasefire should be in place, ensured by the Astana tripartite initiative to guarantee the irreversibility of ceasefire and cessation of hostilities.

Meanwhile, a joined effort to confront Daesh/ISIS, Al-Nusrah and their associated terrorist groups should be on the agenda.

Dear friends;

The Syrian government and the Syrian opposition, helped by the tripartite initiative, can start a dialogue to reach a political solution that ends in free, inclusive and transparent elections based on national unity and territorial integrity. Upon successful completion of this process, we hope to see the end of Syrian crisis.

At the same time, all friends of Syria should join hands to remove sanctions and blockage, to help the reconstruction, to facilitate the free return of the displaced population in urgent response to the dire human situation in Syria.

Changes begin in people's minds. The vicious cycle of violence and terrorism can be stopped only if extremist ideologies that justify barbarism, more than often in the false name of religion, are denounced and renounced. This may begin with introducing the true merciful and blessing face of divine religions and an intercultural dialogue among regional neighbors and in the world at large.

British PM to let Trump know she supports nuclear deal

TT POLITICS desk British Prime Minister Theresa May will reaffirm her support for the Iran nuclear deal when she meets U.S. President Donald Trump later this week, her spokeswoman told reporters on Monday.

The British prime minister is due to hold bilateral talks with Trump in Washington on Friday, a day after attending the annual "Republican Retreat" in Philadelphia.

May's spokeswoman said she expected the prime minister to make clear to Trump that Britain is a strong supporter of the 2015 accord.

Trump's election has raised questions over the future of the nuclear deal – the JCPOA – that was signed between Iran and six world powers, as he has threatened to either scrap or change the content of the international agreement.

This, in turn, has concerned many proponents of the nuclear deal, including the other parties involved in nuclear negotiations that led to the JCPOA, as well as dozens of countries across the world that have entered into Iranian market right after the deal went into effect.

Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), has recently said Tehran reserves the right to "act appropriately" if Washington reconsiders the nuclear deal.

"We can very easily snap back and go back ... not only to where we were, but a much higher position technologically speaking," Salehi said in an interview with Canada's CBC News.

Also, in an interview with IRIB news published on Sunday, Salehi said Iran will not initiate a violation of the JCPOA, warning that "should Washington backtrack on the deal, Tehran will increase uranium enrichment capacity to 100,000 SWU in a year."

On Sunday, Trump spoke by phone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about various issues, one of which was the nuclear deal.

"Stopping the Iranian threat, and first and foremost the threat reflected in the bad nuclear agreement that was signed with Iran, continues to be a supreme goal of the state of Israel," Netanyahu's office said ahead of the call.

Israel has shown itself to be one of the biggest critics of the historic accord.

Back in August 2015, former U.S. President Barack Obama said "with the exception of Israel, every country supports the agreement."

However, EU foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini said last week that the bloc will stand by the JCPOA.

"It is proof that diplomacy works and delivers... The European Union will continue to work for the respect and implementation of this extremely important deal, most of all for our security," Mogherini told reporters as she went into an EU foreign ministers meeting.

VP: Iran able to turn into major power

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Vice President Is'haq Jahangiri said on Monday that Iran is capable to turn into an international major power in economic and political areas.

"Iran can turn into one of the major international powers in economic and political areas through relying on cultural, economic and political capacities," he said during an international conference on investment opportunities and sustainable development in Chabahar, a city of shores of the Sea of Oman.

On the sidelines of the conference seven memorandums of understanding were signed with Korean, Chinese, Omani and Indian companies to develop the Mokran coastal region.

The vice president said that Iran has an important status due to its access to international waters.

He also said, "Leader of the Islamic Revolution and the 'government of prudence and hope' pay lots of attention to development of the Mokran coastal region."

A special emphasis has been put on development of the Mokran region in the sixth development plan, Jahangiri remarked, adding officials should speed up development of the coastal region.

He said involvement of domestic and foreign investors in underprivileged areas is very important.

The vice president also suggested that economic development should not cause any harm to the environment.

Term 'statesman' has nothing to do with gender: expert

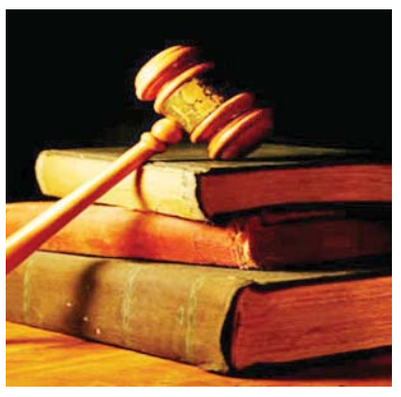
TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** – Mohammad Hashemi, a university professor, has said that the term "statesman" has nothing to do with gender, noting women can also participate in political activities.

The term statesman includes both men and women, ILNA reported Hashemi as saying on Monday.

His comments came as speculations have surged over possible candidacy of Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi in the next presidential election which will be held on May 19.

Vahid-Dastjerdi was the Islamic Republic's first and only female minister, who headed the Ministry of Health and Medical Education between 2009 and 2012.

Under Iran's law, the Guardian Council, a body of jurists and clerics, vets all candidates before any elections. It has rejected candidacy of women for presidency up until now. However, last month, the



council indicated that it might alter a masculine definition of "statesman" so that women could run for presidency for the first time.

Abbasali Kadkhodaei, the council's spokesman, said last month that women could run in the upcoming presidential election, but whether they would be approved by the council is still in debate.

Iran says UN rapporteur 'politicizing' human rights

TT POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Head of the Iranian High Council for Human Rights has criticized the UN Special Rapporteur-designate for Human Rights in Iran Asma Jahangir, saying she is "politicizing" human rights issue.

In a letter addressed to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid bin Ra'ad al-Hussein, Mohammad Javad Larijani described Jahangir's latest remarks as "completely false, unjustified and disappointing", ISNA reported on Monday.

Before publishing reports on the human rights conditions in Iran, the body should inform Tehran of every kind of its allegations so that the Islamic Republic can explain, Larijani remarked.

Larijani said Mrs. Jahangir is not treating Iran professionally and fairly that is required of someone in her position.

The continuation of such trends could undoubtedly reduce the credibility of that council from an official body to a politicized one, the senior rights official said.

He also said Iran's human rights council will provide a clear, unambiguous response to the allegations made by Mrs. Jahangir.

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Syria peace talks off to rocky start

Rebels vow to continue fighting if Astana talks fail

Syrian rebels began peace talks with the government Monday in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, but refused to negotiate face-to-face in the first session.

The talks had been billed as the first time armed rebel groups were due to negotiate with President Bashar Assad's government since the conflict erupted in 2011.

But rebel spokesman Yehya al-Aridi told AFP the opposition backed out of the first round of direct talks because of the government's continued bombardment and attacks on a flash point area near Damascus.

"The first negotiation session will not be face-to-face because the government hasn't committed until now to what it signed in the December 30 agreement," Aridi said, referring to the fragile cease-fire deal brokered by Turkey and Russia.

Although the rebels and government sat at the same table for the opening of the talks, it remained unclear whether the two sides would negotiate directly later.

The talks also coincide with a rapprochement between government ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey, who brokered the current truce after months of U.S. disengagement in the conflict.

Several rounds of failed talks in Geneva saw political opposition figures take the lead in negotiating with the government .

But in Astana, the 14-member opposition delegation is composed solely of rebels leading the armed uprising, with members of the political opposition serving as advisers.

The negotiations have been widely welcomed, but the two sides arrived in Astana with apparently divergent ideas on their aim.

Chief rebel negotiator Mohammad Alloush said in his opening statement that the opposition was focused on bolstering the nationwide truce, but Assad has insisted rebels lay down their arms in exchange for an amnesty deal.

"We came here to reinforce the cease-fire as the first phase of this process," Alloush said in comments broadcast online. "We will not proceed to the next phases until this actually happens on the ground."

Damascus has also called for a "comprehensive" political solution to a conflict that has killed more than 310,000 and displaced more than half of Syria's population.

The head of the government delegation, Syria's UN ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari, said in his opening comments carried by the country's SANA state news agency that he hoped the talks "will reinforce the cessation of hostilities."

He added the government was keen to separate the rebels from ISIL and former Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

More than cease-fire

"This is not a replacement for the Geneva process," rebel negotiator Fares Buyush told AFP, referring to the UN-hosted political negotiations set to resume in the Swiss city next month.

Delegation spokesman Osama Abu Zeid said the rebels were concerned with "more than just a cease-fire."

"The issue is putting monitoring, investigation, and accountability mechanisms in place," he told AFP. "We want these mechanisms so that this doesn't play out over and over."

Previous pushes for a long-term cease-fire have faltered, with both sides trading accusations over violations.

Syrian state media reported the government had met the Iranian delegation as well as U.N. Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura ahead of Monday's talks, to discuss their positions.

De Mistura is serving as a moderator between the sides, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told a press conference broadcast on Russian state television.

As the sides headed to Astana, three government airstrikes killed nine civilians in rebel-held areas in the central Syrian province of Homs, opposition-aligned activists said.

'No shortcut'

Although Russia and Turkey back opposing sides, they have worked hand-in-hand in recent weeks to try to secure an end to the brutal war.

The Astana talks will be a major test of this new partnership after Russia and Turkey conducted their first joint airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria last week.

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration was invited to participate in the talks but did not send a delegation.

Washington is instead represented by its ambassador to Kazakhstan, the State Department said, while a European diplomatic source said France and Britain are represented at the ambassador level.

Experts say a breakthrough could see some of the armed opposition join next month's Geneva talks.

"Nearly six years of war demonstrates there is no shortcut to ending it," a Western diplomat told AFP.

"A genuine transition in Syria first means building confidence on the ground. That is what the opposition have demanded and it's not so much to ask."

Meanwhile, Syrian rebels have vowed to continue fighting if talks with the government in the Kazakh capital Astana fail, a rebel spokesman said Monday.

"If the negotiations succeed, then we are with the negotiations," rebel spokesman Osama Abu Zeid told AFP. "If they don't succeed, unfortunately we'll have no choice but to continue fighting." *(Source: agencies)*

Kremlin says expects to agree date for Trump-Putin phone call soon

The Kremlin said on Monday it expected to soon agree a date for the first phone call between President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Donald Trump, but that it had no information for now about when the two men might hold their first meeting.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a conference call with reporters that contacts between Moscow and Washington about the date of the first phone call were being handled by the Russian Foreign Ministry.

It was too early to talk about the details of any possible cooperation between Russia and the United States in fighting Islamist militants, Peskov said. Trump has named defeating Islamic State as a priority for his administration.

(Source: Reuters)

White House vows to fight media 'tooth and nail' over Trump coverage

The White House vowed to fight the news media "tooth and nail" over what it sees as unfair attacks, with a top adviser saying the Trump administration had presented "alternative facts" to counter low inauguration crowd estimates.

On his first full day as president, Trump said he had a "running war" with the media and accused journalists of underestimating the number of people who turned out Friday for his swearing-in.

White House officials made clear no truce was on the horizon on Sunday in television interviews that set a much harsher tone in the traditionally adversarial relationship between the White House and the press corps.

"The point is not the crowd size. The point is the attacks and the attempt to delegitimize this president in one day. And we're not going to sit around and take it," Chief of Staff Reince Priebus said on "Fox News Sunday."

The sparring with the media has dominated Trump's first weekend in office, eclipsing debate over policy and Cabinet appointments.

It was the main theme at the Republican president's first visit to the CIA, at the press secretary's first media briefing and in senior officials' first appearances on the Sunday talk shows.

Together, they made clear the administration will continue to take an aggressive stance with news organizations covering Trump.

"We're going to fight back tooth and nail every day and twice on Sunday," Priebus said.

He repeated White House press secretary Sean Spicer's assertions on Saturday that the media manipulated photographs of the National Mall to make the crowds on Friday look smaller than they really were.

Aerial photographs showed the crowds were significantly smaller than when Barack Obama took over as president in 2009.

The Washington subway system said it had 193,000 riders on Friday, compared with 513,000 at that time during the 2009 inauguration.

Spicer's categorical assertion that "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration - period" was widely challenged in media reports citing crowd count experts and was lampooned on social media as well.

Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" why the press secretary was uttering provable falsehoods, White House senior adviser Kellyanne Conway fired back.

"If we are going to keep referring to our press secretary in those types of terms I think that we are going to rethink our relationship here," she said.

Conway responded to criticism that the new administration was focusing on crowds rather than on significant domestic and foreign policy issues by saying: "We feel compelled to go out and clear the air and put alternative facts out there."

Priebus and Conway focused on a press pool report that said the bust of civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. had been removed from the Oval Office after Trump took office. The report on Friday night was quickly corrected, but Trump called out the reporter by name during a visit to the Central Intelligence Agency on Saturday. Spicer also berated the reporter later in the day.

Russian shadows

With the Nov. 8 election results shadowed by U.S. intelligence reports of Russian meddling on his behalf, Trump has bristled at reports suggesting his popular support is soft and that the election was not legitimate.

Trump, who lost the popular vote to Democrat Hillary Clinton by nearly 3 million votes, made no mention of Russia in his first visit to the CIA on Saturday. He praised his nominee to head the agency, Mike Pompeo, and ranted against the "dishonest" media, a favorite target during his presidential campaign.

The president accused the media of fabricating his tensions with the U.S. intelligence community, despite his frequent posts on Twitter that derided the agencies.

Trump drew criticism from Democrats as well as former CIA Director John Brennan for his remarks at the agency, where he spoke before a memorial wall with stars representing personnel killed in action.

"President Trump ought to realize he's not campaigning anymore. He's president," Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said on ABC's "This Week."

"Instead of talking about how many people showed up at his inauguration, he ought to be talking about how many people are going to stay in the middle class and move into the middle class." *(Source: Reuters)*

Iraqi forces regain control of two more neighborhoods in east Mosul

Iraqi government forces have managed to liberate two more neighborhoods in Mosul from the clutches of the ISIL (Daesh) terrorists as they try to push the extremists out of their last urban stronghold in the country.

The commander of Nineveh Liberation Operation, Lieutenant General Abdul Amir Yarallah, said on Sunday that soldiers from the 71st Brigade of the 15th Division in the Iraqi Army had recaptured al-Milayeen neighborhood and al-Binaa al-Jahiz area east of the city, located some 400 kilometers north of the capital, Baghdad, Arabic-language al-Sumaria television network reported.

Yarallah added that government forces had raised the Iraqi flag over several buildings in both locations.

The high-ranking Iraqi military commander also noted that troops had established control over the road linking Mosul to the northern city of Dohuk in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region.

Members of the 9th Armored Division in the Iraqi Army retook the road linking Bahwiza neighborhood in northern Mosul to the Assyrian town of Tel Keppe.

The latest territorial gains almost seal the Iraqi forces' control over the eastern bank of the Tigris River, with only Rashidiyah neighborhood left to be retaken.

Daesh forces Mosul women to hand over gold coins

Meanwhile, an unnamed local source says the so-called Supreme Audit Court of Daesh has obligated all women in the al-Dawassah neighborhood of western Mosul to donate gold coins to finance the terror outfit in battles against government soldiers.

The source went on to say that the Takfiris had threatened punishment against those who did not abide by the rules, having whipped four women in public for their refusal to take the measure.

Iraqi army soldiers, supported by fighters from pro-government Popular Mobilization Units, commonly known by the Arabic word, Hashd al-Sha'abi, and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, launched a joint operation on October 17, 2016 to retake Mosul from Daesh terrorists.

(Source: Press TV)

Top Hamas leader in Gaza visits Egypt, 1st trip since 2013

The top Hamas official from the Gaza Strip arrived in Egypt for meetings with security officials, the highest level visit by a member of the Palestinian group since Egypt's army overthrew a president in 2013.

Ismail Haniyeh arrived late Sunday, Egyptian security officials said, as Hamas officials confirmed the visit. All spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to brief reporters.

Hamas enjoyed warm relations with Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, a top Brotherhood figure who was overthrown by the military after a divisive year in power.

The Egyptian government tightened an Israeli-Egyptian blockade on Hamas-ruled Gaza shortly thereafter, but in recent months there have been signs of a thaw in relations.

For most of the past decade, Egypt has been a quiet partner with Israel in a blockade on Hamas-ruled Gaza, stifling the economy and largely blocking its 2 million people from moving in and out of the territory. But after a three-year crackdown, signs are emerging that Egypt is easing the pressure in a step to repair its shattered ties with the group.

In recent months, Cairo has increased the number of people allowed to exit through the Rafah border crossing, Gaza's main gateway to the outside world. It also has begun to allow Gaza to import commercial goods through Rafah for the first time since 2013, and sent public signals that it is interested in improving relations.

Haniyeh left Gaza in September to perform the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca - the first time Egypt allowed him to leave the territory since Morsi's ouster.

He then went to Qatar to see Hamas leader Khalid Mashaal and discuss issues including the group's upcoming elections. Mashaal is slated to step down from his position this spring, and Haniya is considered a strong candidate to replace him. Meshaal's deputy Moussa Abu Marzouk is the other main candidate.

(Source: AP)

Abbas warns of 'ramifications' if U.S. embassy moved

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has met with Jordan's King Abdullah II to discuss "ramifications" if the U.S. moves its Israel embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem al-Quds.

Following the meeting which was held in Jordan's capital Amman on Sunday, Abbas said that "a series of steps we'll take if the U.S. moves the embassy to Jerusalem" had been agreed upon.

Abbas stressed that relocating the embassy "is an important matter for the king and an important matter for us. There will be no alternative to coordinating and articulating action points with one another to fight any steps that, if acted upon, would have severe ramifications."

He added that further coordination with Jordan was necessary ahead of Abdullah's upcoming visit the U.S. and Russia over the next few weeks.

"I hope the American administration will act on two levels, one, to not discuss moving the embassy to Jerusalem and second, for the administration to lead negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis with the aim of achieving a political settlement," said Abbas, adding that "this is the best contribution the United States could make."

Earlier in the day, the White House said that the U.S. government was "at the very beginning stages of even discussing" the embassy relocation.

During his campaign, U.S. President Donald Trump repeatedly said that if elected, he would not hesitate to relocate the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem al-Quds, which is regarded by Palestinians as their future capital. The controversial decision has evoked Palestinians' bitter opposition.

Palestine slams new Israeli settlement plans

Earlier in the day, Israeli regime officials approved the construction of 566 new Israeli settler units in East Jerusalem al-Quds.

After the announcement was made, Palestinian presidential spokesperson Nabil Abu Rideinh stressed that Tel Aviv's decision directly defied a recent resolution by the UNSC against such illegal activities.

On December 23, the UNSC passed Resolution 2334 with 14 votes in favor and one abstention by the U.S. It condemned the establishment of settlements by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories as a "flagrant violation under international law," which it said was "dangerously imperiling the viability" of peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Abu Rideinh called on the UNSC to abide by it own resolution and "to put an end to the extremist Israeli government policy that is seeking to destroy the two state solution."

More than half a million Israelis live in over 230 settlements built since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank including East Jerusalem al-Quds. The international community regards the settlements as illegal as they are built on private Palestinian lands. Israel has defied international calls for a halt to its settlement activities.

(Source: agencies)

A rising tide of used cars threatens Ford's profits

A glut of used vehicles has started to depress prices. That trend will intensify as Americans will return 3.36 million leased cars and trucks this year, another jump after a 33 percent surge in 2016, according to J.D. Power. The fallout has already begun, with Ford Motor Co. shaving $300 million from its financial-services arm's profit forecast for this year.

"Ford is the canary in the coal mine," said Maryann Keller, a former Wall Street analyst who's now an auto industry consultant in Stamford, Connecticut.

This drag may be hitting the rest of the industry, too. A National Automobile Dealers Association index of used-vehicle prices declined each of the last six months of last year. If used values weaken more than anticipated, it can lead to losses across the industry, hitting carmakers, auto lenders and rental companies. *(Source: Bloomberg)*

Germany plans to close tax loophole for foreign firms

Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet is expected to approve a measure on Wednesday to close a tax loophole used by foreign companies operating in Germany, according to legislation drafted by finance ministry and viewed by Reuters on Monday.

The legislation, which would still need approval by the German parliament, is expected to take effect from 2018 and result in 30 million euros in additional income for German federal, state and local governments, according to the draft.

The legislation calls for tightening rules that allow deduction of certain internal expenses to discourage firms from transferring patents, licenses, concessions and market rights to other countries that either apply low taxes or none at all.

Germany's move comes amid efforts by the Group of 20 industrialized countries and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED) to combat licensing and patent loopholes. *(Source: Reuters)*

Japan's PM says will keep seeking Trump's understanding on TPP

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Monday he believed U.S. President Donald Trump understood the value of free trade and that he would keep pitching a multinational trade pact that Trump's administration has vowed to exit.

"I believe President Trump understands the importance of free and fair trade, so I'd like to pursue his understanding on the strategic and economic importance of the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) trade pact," Abe told a session of parliament's lower house.

Abe also said he wanted to strengthen the U.S.-Japan security alliance, based on mutual trust with Trump.

"When we met last time, I believed him to be trustworthy, this belief has not changed today," Abe added, referring to his November meeting with then-president-elect Trump.

Abe also said Tokyo wanted to explain how its companies have contributed to the U.S. economy, a stance the Japanese government has adopted to try to fend off threats of a "border tax" on imports into the United States.

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said separately that Tokyo would closely monitor any impact of the new U.S. administration's policies on its companies and that he wanted to deepen economic ties between the two countries.

Trump took office as the 45th president of the U.S. on Friday and pledged to end what he called an "American carnage" of rusted factories and crime in an inaugural address that was a populist and nationalist rallying cry.

The new Trump administration said on Friday its trade strategy to protect American jobs would start with withdrawal from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact.

The trade deal, which the United States signed but has not ratified, was a pillar of former president Barack Obama's pivot to Asia, and Abe has touted it as an engine of economic reform, as well as a counter-weight to a rising China. *(Source: Reuters)*

Trump to meet executives, labor leaders in first full day in office

U.S. President Donald Trump planned to hold meetings on Monday with business and labor leaders to discuss manufacturing and other matters as he starts his first full week in office.

The Republican, who took office on Friday after eight years of a Democratic White House, was scheduled to meet with business leaders at 9 a.m. EST (1400 GMT), followed by an afternoon meeting with labor leaders and U.S. workers, according to his schedule.

The White House, which announced the meetings in a daily schedule released late on Sunday, did not name specific company executives or union leaders.

According to Bloomberg News, the meeting will include Dow Chemical Co (DOW.N) Chief Executive Officer Andrew Liveris, whom Trump tapped last month to lead a private-sector advisory group on manufacturing. Reuters could not immediately confirm the report, which cited an administration official.

Trump said on Twitter early on Monday that he planned to discuss U.S. manufacturing with the executives but gave no other details.

"Busy week planned with a heavy focus on jobs and national security," Trump said in a tweet. "Top executives coming in at 9:00 A.M. to talk manufacturing in America."

Before taking office, Trump hosted a number of U.S. CEOs in meetings in New York, including those from defense, technology and other sectors. He also met with leaders of several unions, including the AFL-CIO. *(source; Reuters)*

Iran climbs in World Bank's LPI global ranking

TT ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** Iran's Logistics Performance Index (LPI) has jumped 18 places in 2016 to 96th compared to 114th in 2014, according to the World Bank's "International LPI Global Ranking 2016" report.

Iran's LPI index stood at 2.6 in 2016, an increase of 0.09 compared to 2.51 in 2014, the report said.

LPI is an interactive benchmarking tool created to help countries identify the challenges and opportunities they face in their performance on trade logistics and what they can do to improve their performance.

It is based on the countries' performances in six different areas including customs, infrastructure, international shipments, logistics competence, tracking & tracing and timeliness.

Regardless of the good performance, the WB data indicated that among countries with the same level of income (upper middle income) Iran's LPI stood lower by 0.08 for 2016, the figures were reported to be 2.6 versus 2.68 for Iran and the income group respectively.

The WB's collected data for 2007-2014 showed that among the "same income group" countries, those with better logistics performances witnessed one percent growth in their gross domestic product (GDP) and also two percent increase in trade.

Iran's Customs Administration has set the improvement of such logistics performance indicators as one of its strategic priorities and is pursuing this objective by setting up the comprehensive system of customs affairs and creating single-window trade system.

Iran's forex, gold reserves at $135.5b in 2016: CIA

TT ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN –** The value of Iran's foreign exchange and gold reserves stood at $135.5 billion in 2016, showing a $25.5-billion increase compared to its preceding year, according to a survey conducted by the CIA.

Iran owned $110 billion worth of foreign exchange and gold in 2015, Tasnim news agency reported on Monday, citing the CIA data.

Having $13.5 billion of reserves of foreign exchange and gold, the country ranks 16th among the 170 countries studied in the CIA's survey.

As reported, Iran's reserves of foreign exchange and gold in 2016 surpassed those of Italy, England, the U.S., Turkey, Canada, and Spain.

China possessing $3.092 trillion of reserves of foreign exchange and gold ranked first in CIA's list, followed by Switzerland with $602 billion worth of reserves.

Somalia with $30 million of reserves of foreign exchange and gold was the last country in the list.

UK seeks interventionist approach to drive post-Brexit industrial revival

Britain is to adopt an interventionist approach to balancing its heavily services-based economy for the post-Brexit era, aiming to reinvigorate industrial production and stimulate investment in technology and R&D.

Unveiling her long-awaited 'Modern Industrial Strategy' on Monday, Prime Minister Theresa May will demand closer collaboration within key industries in exchange for government support on regulation, trade and research.

The focus on industry and the shift to a governmental hands-on approach challenges the traditional Conservative laissez-faire ideology championed by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

May will ask businesses to work together to tackle industry-specific challenges, citing examples of successful collaboration that have helped attract overseas investment from the likes of carmaker Nissan (7201.T), and enabled aerospace firms such as BAE Systems (BAES.L) to develop a competitive edge.

In return she will pledge to reciprocate with 'Sector Deals' that address regulatory barriers, look at how trade and investment deals can be used to increase exports, and support the creation of new institutions to provide leadership, drive innovation or boost skills.

"The modern industrial strategy will back Britain for the long term: creating the conditions where successful businesses can emerge and grow, and backing them to invest in the long-term future of our country," May said in an emailed statement prior to the announcement.

The outline of the strategy - expected to range across economic, regional, education transport and digital policy - will be set out in a 'Green Paper' consultation document

due to be published later on Monday, seeking input from industry.

"Today's Green Paper signals a more ambitious approach to securing growth and preparing for the inevitable pressures that will accompany Brexit," said Paul Everitt CEO of the aerospace trade body ADS.

The government also listed 10 strategic pillars behind its strategy such as skills development and improved procurement.

Back in fashion

Since coming to office weeks after Britain's vote to leave the EU last year, May has pushed the once-unfashionable concept of industrial strategy to the top of her agenda, creating a new government department to lead the project, and chairing a top-level cabinet committee on the subject.

It comes as Britain's impending exit from the EU threatens to undermine the financial services sector, with several banks planning to shift thousands of jobs abroad because they fear they will lose access to the EU market.

May said last week that Britain would be withdrawing from the single market, and seeking a free trade agreement with the EU instead - a path critics have described as 'Hard Brexit'.

"The idea that the government can have any reasonable strategy for British industry while recklessly withdrawing from the single market is laughable," said Don Foster, business spokesman for the rival and pro-EU Liberal Democrat party.

"It's like the manager tying their team's bootlaces together while telling them they have a plan to win the match."

Under the banner of building an economy that distributes wealth more evenly, following decades of industrial decay in parts of Britain, the plan seeks to protect the economy from the risk of leaving the EU and address a mood of disenfranchisement that drove many voters to back Brexit.

The government said early work had been done on sector deals for a number of industries: life sciences, ultra-low emission vehicles, nuclear and creative industries. But it said it would work with any sector that could "organise behind strong leadership to address shared challenges and opportunities."

May will present the full proposals, including plans to boost the teaching of technical skills and mathematics, and a 556 million pound boost for infrastructure projects, at a specially-convened cabinet meeting in Northwest England. *(Source: Reuters)*

China clamps down on banks moving currency overseas

Chinese regulators are stamping out moves by banks to shift renminbi out of the country as they attack one of the few loopholes remaining in the country's strict new capital controls regime.

The tightening is another setback for the Chinese government's larger strategy of internationalizing its currency — a goal that has taken a back seat to stabilizing capital outflows and the renminbi's depreciation against the dollar. According to several people briefed on rules introduced this month, banks in Shanghai must "import" Rmb100 for every Rmb100 they allow a client to remit overseas, ensuring no net outflows of the Chinese currency. Shanghai-based banks had been allowed to remit Rmb160 overseas for every Rmb100 they brought back into China. The clampdown goes even further in Beijing where banks must import Rmb100 for every Rmb80 they remit overseas on behalf of clients, ensuring a net inflow into the capital. The People's Bank of China declined to comment. Chinese regulators have been concerned about the renminbi's relatively rapid depreciation against the dollar, which they have slowed by selling down the country's foreign exchange reserves. To preserve China's forex stockpile, which stood at just over $3tn at the end of last year, the central bank and State Administration for Foreign Exchange have implemented a series of capital controls over recent months. In November the PBoC and Safe introduced stricter vetting procedures for China-based companies that wished to remit foreign currency for overseas acquisitions. Dividend payments and shareholder loan repayments by foreign investors were also subjected to tighter scrutiny — as were forex purchases by Chinese citizens.

Remitting renminbi offshore, where it can be converted into foreign exchange, was one way to avoid new capital controls. Such transfers were also consistent with Beijing's desire to promote the renminbi as an international currency, by encouraging companies to use it for trade transactions, shareholder loan repayments and dividend remittances. "Chinese importers are having trouble paying trade invoices denominated in renminbi," said one person briefed. According to policy researcher NSBO, net renminbi outflows from China exceeded Rmb265bn ($38.5bn) in September but have since plummeted as Chinese regulators close the loophole. "The use of renminbi for foreign transactions, which had been used to evade capital controls, dropped sharply [in December] to its lowest level since September 2015," NSBO said in a report on Friday. Overseas banks, whose domestic market share in China is tiny, have been more affected by the clampdown because they derive a higher percentage of revenues from cross-border business. "This regulation is a bigger nightmare for foreign banks because we are more reliant on cross-border business than Chinese banks," one banker said. Bankers have also complained that the central bank and Safe are only communicating regulatory "window guidance" over the phone or during face-to-face meetings, rather than in writing. They added that Safe has instructed banks not to inform clients why their overseas remittances are being rejected and is checking their net renminbi flows on a weekly basis, compared with every month previously. "It's up to us to tell clients sorry, we can't let you do the transfer," the banker added. "But obviously the clients know what is going on. This is not a secret." *(Source: Financial Times)*

NEWS IN BRIEF

Singapore Dec. headline CPI rises 0.2% from year earlier

Singapore's headline consumer prices index rose from a year earlier due to an increase in private road transport cost, data showed on Monday.

The all-items consumer price index (CPI) in December rose 0.2 percent from a year earlier. The median forecast in a Reuters poll was for headline CPI to rise 0.1 percent from a year earlier.

In November, headline CPI showed zero inflation, coming off a deflationary trend for the first time in two years.

South Korea prosecutors to investigate other conglomerates after Samsung probe

South Korea's special prosecutor's office said on Monday it plans to investigate other conglomerates after completing its probe of Samsung Group [SAGR.UL], whose leader has been named a suspect in a graft scandal involving President Park Geun-hye.

Prosecution office spokesman Lee Kyu-chul did not elaborate on when the probe into Samsung may end or what other conglomerates the office plans to investigate.

Essentra sees full year operating profit near lower end of forecast

Essentra Plc, a supplier of specialty plastic and packaging components, warned that full-year adjusted operating profit would miss or meet only the lower end of its forecast, citing challenging market conditions in health and personal care packaging unit.

The company said it expects adjusted operating profit to be at, or modestly below, the lower end of its guidance range of 137 million-142 million pounds for the year ended Dec. 31.

The company had cut its full-year profit guidance in November.

OPEC shrugs off threat of U.S. cutting oil imports

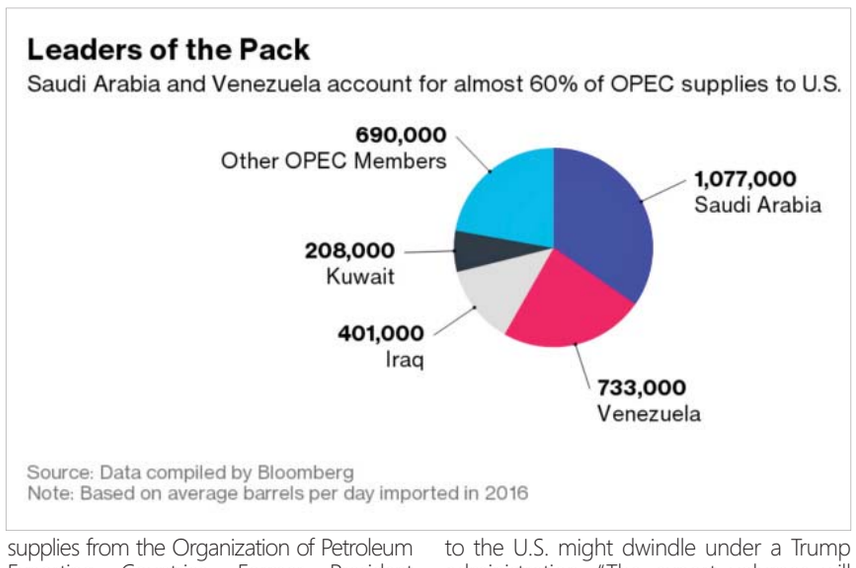
OPEC's two biggest suppliers to the U.S. shrugged off a vow by President Donald Trump to end dependence on the group's oil, saying the world's biggest economy would continue to need crude from abroad.

The U.S. is "closely integrated in the global energy market," Saudi Arabia's Energy and Industry Minister Khalid Al-Falih said, while his Venezuelan counterpart Nelson Martinez said he expects his country's crude exports to the world's top consumer to remain stable.

"The positions that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia take in global energy are very important for global economic stability," Al-Falih said at a meeting of producing countries in Vienna. He added that Saudi Arabia was looking forward to working with the Trump administration.

Just after his inauguration on Friday, Trump said he was "committed to achieving energy independence from the OPEC cartel and any nations hostile to our interests," by exploiting "vast untapped domestic energy reserves", according to a plan posted on the White House website. The U.S. imported about 3 million barrels a day from the organization last year, with Saudi Arabia and Venezuela accounting for 1.81 million, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

This isn't the first time a U.S. president promises to end the country's reliance on supplies from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. Former President George W. Bush promised to cut imports from the Middle East when he said in 2006 the nation was "addicted to oil." Shipments from OPEC rose 10 percent during Bush's time in office. Every U.S. president going back to Richard Nixon has pledged to reduce the country's reliance on foreign oil.



'Everyone's good'

Venezuela's Martinez played down any concern that his country's shipments to the U.S. might dwindle under a Trump administration. "The export volumes will be maintained," he said. "There is a lot of interdependence in the world of energy. It's good to maintain it for everyone's good."

Saudi Arabia exported an average of 1.08 million barrels a day of crude to the U.S. in 2016, while Venezuela shipped about 733,000 barrels a day and Iraq some 400,000 barrels a day, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

OPEC is waiting for a new U.S. energy secretary to take office to learn more about Trump's energy policies, Mohammad Barkindo, the group's secretary-general, said in the Austrian capital on Sunday.

The U.S. is benefiting from the price increase following OPEC's December agreement with other producers to reduce oil output, according to Algeria, another member of the group. "OPEC is currently helping the U.S.," Noureddine Boutarfa said Saturday in an interview with Bloomberg in Vienna. "The price recovery is helping U.S. companies, the U.S. industry, the U.S. economy."

Crude prices rose to an 18-month high of more than $58 a barrel after OPEC and several non-members agreed to end two years of unlimited production and instead cut output. Prices have since slipped about 5 percent from that peak as traders await proof that the producers will follow through.

Even as Trump commits to ending U.S. reliance on OPEC's oil, the new administration said it would "work with our Persian Gulf allies to develop a positive energy relationship as part of our anti-terrorism strategy."

Al-Falih suggested Saudi Arabia could always export its oil somewhere else, if the U.S. stopped buying.

"Oil is fungible, so it flows around -- what doesn't get sold in one market can be sold in another," he said.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Oil eases after two-day gain, rising U.S. production weighs

Oil ticked lower on Monday, falling for the first time in three sessions as prospects of rising U.S. production weighed on the market.

U.S. energy companies last week added the most rigs drilling for new production in almost four years. Drillers added 29 rigs in the week to Jan. 20, bringing the total count up to 551, the most since November 2015, energy services firm Baker Hughes said on Friday.

U.S. oil production has risen more than six percent since mid-2016, although it remains seven percent below a historic high in 2015. It is back to levels of late 2014, when strong U.S. crude output contributed to a crash in oil prices.

Brent crude, the international benchmark for oil prices, was trading at $55.42 per barrel at 0441 GMT, down seven cents from its last close. U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures fell 11 cents to $53.11 a barrel.

Crude oil had traded higher earlier in the session on the back of output cuts by OPEC and other producers.

Production cuts by oil producers and a weaker dollar prevented the market from dropping further.

OPEC and non-OPEC countries have made a strong start to lowering their oil output under the first such pact in more than a decade, energy ministers said on Sunday as producers look to reduce oversupply and support prices.

Ministers said 1.5 million of almost 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd) had already been taken out of the market.

"Oil is trading in a range," said Jeffrey Halley, senior market analyst at OANDA brokerage in Singapore.

"In the medium term it is going to be tough for oil to break out. The more oil goes up, the more these shale drillers are going to hedge by the futures."

On the technical front, Brent may climb up to $56.55 per barrel, as it has cleared resistance at $55.43, according to Wang Tao, Reuters analyst for commodities and energy technical.

Hedge funds rushed to place bullish wagers on U.S. crude oil last week, data showed on Friday.

The U.S. dollar fell against the euro and yen on Tuesday after a drop in oil prices suggested U.S. inflation would stay low and prevent the Federal Reserve from hiking interest rates at a steady pace this year. Risk aversion also boosted the euro and yen.

(Source: Reuters)

Russia beats Saudi Arabia as China's top crude oil supplier in 2016

Russia overtook Saudi Arabia in 2016 to become China's biggest crude oil supplier for the first year ever, customs data showed on Monday, boosted by robust demand from independent Chinese "teapot" refineries.

Russian shipments surged nearly a quarter over 2015 to about 1.05 million barrels per day (bpd), the data showed, with Saudi Arabia coming in a close second with 1.02 million bpd, up 0.9 percent in 2016 versus the previous year. China is the world's second-largest oil buyer and the fastest-growing major importer.

While Saudi Arabia counts China's state oil firms as backbone clients over long-term supply contracts, China's independent refineries - nicknamed "teapots" due to their smaller processing capacity - saw Russia as a more flexible supplier.

For the teapot plants, authorized to import crude oil importers for the first time in late 2015, shipments from Russia's eastern ports are easier to process, coming in smaller cargo sizes from closer proximity.

For December, Russia also held the top spot with supplies up 4.8 percent from the same month a year earlier at 1.19 million bpd. Meanwhile Saudi December sales dropped nearly 20 percent from a year earlier to 841,820 bpd, data from the Chinese General Administration of Customs showed.

Total crude oil imports in December hit a record as refiners stepped up purchases ahead of a deal by oil-producing countries to reduce supply and bolster prices.

For the whole of 2016, imports gained nearly 910,000 bpd over 2015, the strongest annual growth on record.

Third-largest supplier Angola shipped 13 percent more crude last year versus 2015, while No.4 seller Iraq recorded similar growth.

China also boosted imports from South American producers last year, with growth of 37.6 percent from Brazil and 26 percent from Venezuela, the data showed.

(Source: Reuters)

Europe needs refashioning to address its anger and fears

By Lodewijk Asscher

With the rightwing and populist tide that seemingly holds Europe in its grip, scapegoat politics is gaining the upper hand. I share the passion of my progressive colleagues to provide a strong, social and decent alternative to the politics of division and inequality. Nevertheless, we social democrats have a responsibility when so many dissatisfied Europeans see no other option than to pull the emergency brake. The Netherlands is unfortunately no exception to this.

One of the sources of this dissatisfaction is the lack of control that many people experience when it comes to changes in our daily lives or in our economy. Globalization leads to a strong contrast between those who benefit from it and those who struggle. Wage-lowering labour migration in Europe nowadays leads to unequal competition between workers. Migration leads to tension within and between communities. And this lack of control cannot be diminished by making forced efforts to emphasize a European identity. For this, we need unity in diversity.

Progressive patriotism is the required antidote not only against the nationalist and xenophobic politics, but also as an alternative for the politics that ridicules or even throws suspicion on the longing for community or national identity.

Many ordinary Europeans have become poorer and more insecure after the financial crisis. Simultaneously, people see multinationals such as Starbucks and Apple using sly legal schemes to avoid taxation, while their local pubs and they themselves contribute dutifully.

The symbol of social injustice

For too many people, the European Union has become the symbol of social injustice, which makes its enormous achievement of peace and co-operation fade into the background. Is it strange that people are fed up with the EU? I believe not. This is why we need new, fair and progressive rules of the game. And those can only be set when we collaborate. The forthcoming Brexit negotiations provide us with a unique opportunity to set those new rules.

We should quit labour migration that only cuts wages. Europe's promise was to make social progress possible for everyone, with decent jobs that are being valued with decent wages. Nonetheless, for many Europeans, labour migration nowadays leads to lower wages and unemployment. Because of the European directives about the posting of workers, to many the free movement of workers equals unfair competition on the labour market. This has to stop.

We also have to put an end to the system wherein the multinational hardly pays any taxes, while the bakery down the road does. This can be achieved through fair profits taxation and making tax avoidance and tax rebates illegal. If you and I pay taxes, so should the large enterprises. Let's fight the race to the bottom for profits taxation together that threatens to come into existence if it is up to the Conservative UK government.

(The Guardian)

France's answer to Donald Trump

By Andreas Whittam Smith

A characteristic Macron shares with Trump is an ability to attract huge crowds to his meetings.

It is Emmanuel Macron, not Marine Le Pen, who will come to be known as France's answer to Donald Trump.

Imagine. Someone who has never hitherto stood for elected office is running strongly to be the next President of France. This is Emmanuel Macron, who is currently third in the polls with 20 per cent, not far behind Marine Le Pen with 26 per cent and François Fillon with 25 per cent. Voting takes place in April.

We can imagine, of course, because Donald Trump has just shown how it is done. But at least Trump had TV fame when he announced his decision to run. He had been the host of the popular American show The Apprentice for 14 seasons. But when Macron raised his standard, he must have been unknown to 90 per cent of French voters.

Nevertheless, a characteristic Macron shares with Trump is an ability to attract huge crowds to his meetings. When he announced he was running last November, some 15,000 people came to hear him speak at the Porte de Versailles in Paris. In the gritty, left-leaning city of Lille, 4,000 turned up. Earlier this month, 2,000 Macron supporters filled a hall in Clermont-Ferrand with 500 turned away. Three days later, one of the Socialist party contenders, Manuel Valls, the former Prime Minister, found himself addressing 300 supporters in a half-empty gym in the same city.

Which party does Macron represent? He doesn't. He has created his own party, 'En Marche!. Where does it fit into the political spectrum? It doesn't. Its founder states that it is "neither on the right or on the left". This lack of traditional positioning may even be one of its appeals. Nor was Trump very different in this regard. Before running he had given money to both the Republicans and the Democrats. He was officially the Republican candidate, but that seems to have been only a matter of convenience, like having a passport for a country where you have hardly ever lived.

The anti-system candidate

There is another striking characteristic of Macron's candidature. He presents himself as the anti-system candidate, yet in terms of education and career he is a perfect example of the French elites. He resembles a duke criticizing the aristocracy.

Thus he attended the highly regarded Lycée Henri-IV school in Paris. He did a degree in public affairs at Sciences Po in the same city, whose nearest British equivalent is the London School of Economics. Finally he took a course at the École nationale d'administration, which is a finishing school for France's ruling class. Among its graduates it counts three presidents, Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Chirac and François Hollande, and six Prime Ministers.

Naturally after this preparation, he went straight into the Ministry for the Economy and Finance. He left to work at the Rothschild Bank and then joined President Hollande's staff at the Élysée. Finally he was appointed minister of economy, industry and digital data in August 2014. And then resigned in August 2016 to found his own party and run for the presidency.

This background could scarcely be more different from Trump's and yet there is a similarity. The American President was also a member of an elite. He is a billionaire businessman. The front door to his offices in New York is a gold and diamond affair. If that is not elite, what is? It is just as distancing from everyday folk as Macron's prestigious education.

However, the difference in policy positions between the two men is very great. Where Trump's inauguration speech focused on putting up walls – America first, protectionism, keeping people out – Macron's policies are largely directed to removing barriers. He calls for a "democratic revolution" and promises to "unblock France".

Thus Macron would scrap France's 35-hour working week for younger workers while at the same time making it easier for businesses to lay workers off. But he would balance that reform with establishing broader unemployment benefits. He believes that older workers should be able work for fewer hours. He also wants to increase state spending on schools in areas where there are large numbers of migrants. In sum, he is determined to change France's post-war model, which, as he told the center-left weekly magazine L'Obs, "has created deep inequalities by favoring mostly insiders, those with a permanent job contract and stable employment ... everyone else has been left aside".

We seem, therefore, to have entered the age of political insurgency. Trump has succeeded; Macron is next to try. Who will follow? Is there a British candidate for this role or is Theresa May trying to play the part?

(Source: Independent)

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INTERVIEW
By Parnaz Talebi

Astana meeting; is peace negotiable?

The Astana peace talks, Russia underlined, is just a complementary platform to Geneva meetings and does not seek rivalry.

Kazakh capital is hosting one the most controversial peace talks since the international efforts started for bringing back the stability to Syria.

Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed upon an agenda to help settle the Syrian crisis earlier in a trilateral meeting held in Moscow on December 20 and the Resolution 2336 was adopted by UNSC on Dec. 31 to support an inclusive ceasefire in Syria and political process. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan had discussed earlier, on December 17, the possibility of holding talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana between the Syrian government and opposition groups with Russia, Iran and Turkey as potential mediators. Kazakh President Nazarbayev supported this initiative, expressing readiness to provide a platform for the talks in the Kazakh capital.

The last round of such talks was held in Geneva on April 13-27, bearing no fruit as the Riyadh-formed High Negotiations Committee (HNC) opposition group walked out of the negotiations. Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria, said in December 2016 that the United Nations plans to resume the talks on February 8, 2017. The Astana peace talks, Russia underlined, is just a complementary platform to Geneva meetings and does not seek rivalry.

Astana talks mark a great step toward the long-desired political solution to the Syrian conflict, as it was able to bring the armed opposition groups to the negotiation table for the first time since the onset of peace meetings. "I believe that one obstacle to the talks was the fact that the UN only sent invitations to members of the political opposition, the overwhelming majority of whom were emigrants living in Europe, the Middle East or other countries but not in Syria, and to some opposition members in Syria... These talks were not attended by those who really determine the situation on the ground, that is, armed groups or armed opposition," Lavrov has emphasized. The participation of armed opposition would contribute to the main objective of Astana talks, which is an inclusive and lasting ceasefire. A lasting ceasefire would establish the stability and peace largely needed for political talks. Accordingly, with a minor US participation in ambassador level and no participation by Arab states of the region, the nature of the Astana talks seems different providing space for a real intra-Syrian talks. Iran and Russia, on the hand, are basically regarded as close allies of Syria and Turkey, although not entirely, but has been flexible and showed eager to help the process during recent months.

Yet the condition is still very complicated and makes any prediction very difficult. First of all the talks are generally a platform for a dialogue between Syria's armed opposition groups and the government of Damascus who have definitely very less in common to negotiate on. The opposition group itself includes different representatives from different groups with different approaches labeled by US as moderates, a division not accepted by Syrian government.

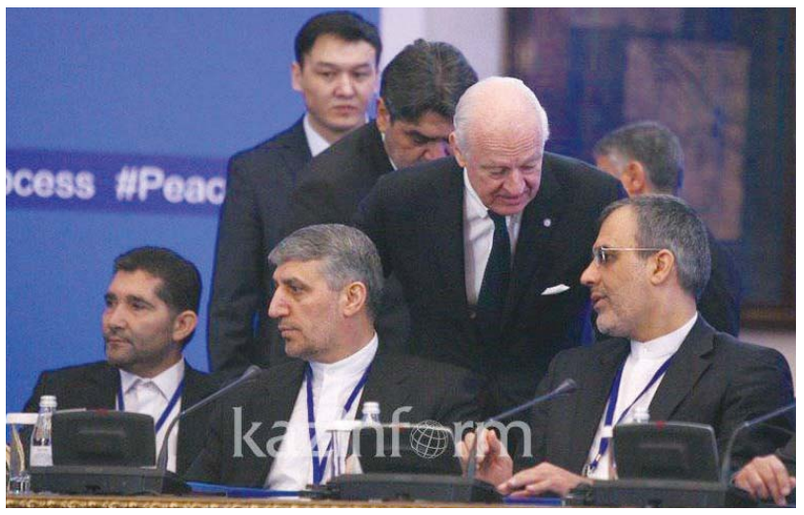
"The rise of ISIS is the direct result of policy decisions made by President Obama and Secretary Clinton; the Obama-Clinton foreign policy has unleashed ISIS, destabilized the Middle East," Trump said in his speech against the terrorism.

Another notable issue is the stance of US, which has just recently welcomed its new President Donald Trump. "The rise of ISIS is the direct result of policy decisions made by President Obama and Secretary Clinton; the Obama-Clinton foreign policy has unleashed ISIS, destabilized the Middle East," Trump said in his speech against the terrorism. Trump also has noted the wrong US approach toward the conflict in Middle East that has paved the way for rise of terrorism "our current strategy of nation-building and regime change is a proven failure. We have created the vacuums that allow terrorists to grow and thrive." He had also expressed readiness to cooperate with Russia on the issue who has the leading role in fight against the terrorists in Syria. However, it would be very difficult the positive role US is claiming it wants to play in the Middle East. The interests of US and its great allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Israeli regime, lie directly at the sectarian conflict currently enflaming the tensions in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

Turkey also is a concern. The country has long been an adversary to the Syrian government collecting efforts to topple down the legitimate Syrian President Assad.

Turkey also is a concern. The country has long been an adversary to the Syrian government collecting efforts to topple down the legitimate Syrian President Assad. Ankara has also been one of the key supporters of the terrorists in Syria by whether letting the flow of human resources through its borders or funding and arming them. The enthusiast Turkey shows in cooperation with Russia and Iran on the Syrian issue, although understandable regarding the insecurity the country is experiencing, raises doubts. Turkey's interests got in a contradictory direction with US' when the latter refused to submit Fetullah Gulen, founder of the Gullen movement, after the failed coup in Turkey. Erdogan's foreign policy then shifted positively toward Russia, Syria and Iran and set the ground for a trilateral cooperation on the Syrian conflict. Other major contrast of Ankara and Washington is the issue of Kurds to whom Turkey looks at as terrorists and fights against while US supports them entirely in the region in hope of setting up an independent Kurdish state. Nonetheless, Turkey has vowed not to let terrorist groups violate the reached ceasefire agreement on December and to establish security at its borders with Syria.

Astana round of talks has been an initiative by Syrian allies and a result of achievements reached in the battle field. A relatively stable ceasefire was established after the trilateral meeting of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Moscow on December and the armed opposition groups are at the moment at the negotiation table with Syrian government in Astana at the presence of mediators like De Mistura, Iran, Russia and Turkey. What is obvious is that such an opportunity should be optimized regardless of all differences. Managed by closest allies of Syria, tries to consolidate the ceasefire and engage of the armed opposition in the Syrian political process. The meeting should be used as a means to stress the political process and the road map toward it requiring all parties involved in the conflict to hold the ceasefire strictly. The talks should put emphasis on legitimacy of fight against terrorists -regardless of their labels- Syria's territorial integrity, and the need to refrain from interfering in the final decision to be agreed upon by Syrian nation and government.



The participation of armed opposition would contribute to the main objective of Astana talks, which is an inclusive and lasting ceasefire.

All you need to know about Astana talks sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran

Representatives of President Bashar al-Assad and armed rebel groups fighting against him are scheduled to take part in talks, sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran, in a bid to reinforce the ceasefire and pave the way for a peace process aimed at putting an end to the six-year-long war which has claimed more than 300,000 lives.

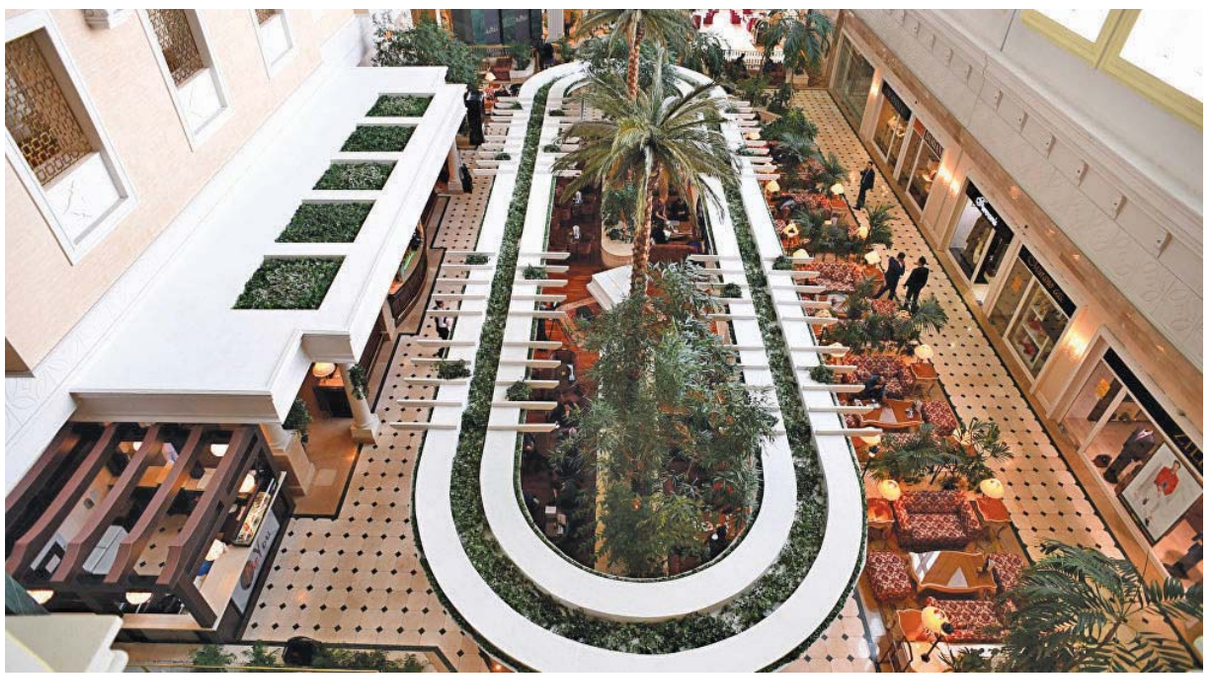
Here's what you need to know about the meeting.

Astana vs Geneva

On December 29, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Damascus and several key radical groups reached a ceasefire deal and agreed to hold a round of talks in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. Until recently, the negotiations on Syria have mainly taken place in Switzerland, with the next round of Geneva talks expected to take place on February 8.

There are several important differences between the two formats. Representatives of armed groups fighting in Syria will take part in the Astana talks, whereas Syrian politicians mostly living abroad have largely represented the opposition to the Syrian government in Geneva.

As a result, the Astana talks will focus primarily on military issues. The ways of enhancing the fragile ceasefire regime are expected to be the main issue on the agenda. These agreements, if reached, will pave the way for a political settlement of the Syrian crisis.



The Astana talks will focus primarily on military issues. The ways of enhancing the fragile ceasefire regime are expected to be the main issue on the agenda.

In addition, representatives of Damascus and the armed opposition are rumored to be willing to meet face to face. In Geneva, the talks on resolving the Syrian conflict were primarily indirect, with the UN representative shuttling between the parties.

The Astana talks "are a major step toward resolving the Syrian crisis," Russian analyst and former diplomat Vyacheslav Matuzov told RT. "The fact that armed groups have arrived [to take part in the negotiations] shows that the first step has been made. In Geneva, the armed opposition refused to come to the negotiating table and [interacted with the delegation from Damascus] through mediators."

24 Hours

The talks in Astana began at 7 a.m. GMT and will wrap up in 24 hours. Representatives of both sides have arrived in Kazakhstan last week and have already held preliminary talks with diplomats from Russia, Turkey and Iran. Moscow, Ankara and Tehran serve as guarantors of the latest ceasefire agreements.

Participants

Bashar Jaafari, Syria's envoy to the United Nations, heads the Damascus delegation. The diplomat has served as Bashar al-Assad's top negotiator at the Geneva talks. Jaafari will be accompanied by Syrian ambassador to Russia Riyad Haddad and Ahmad Arnous, an advisor to the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates.

"All parties understand that Astana is a milestone on the path to the Geneva peace process," Matuzov said.

The exact list of armed opposition groups participating in the consultations in Astana has not been unveiled yet, with some militias backing out of the talks. Representative of up to 15 rebel groups, including Jaysh al-Islam, Faylak al-Sham and Jaish al-Mujahideen are expected to come to the negotiating table. Representatives of Free Syrian Army (FSA) and High Negotiation Committee will also participate in the talks.

Mohammed Alloush, who is a former chief negotiator for the High Negotiation Committee, is said to lead the opposition delegation.

In addition, Russia, Turkey and Iran have sent their delegations to Kazakhstan. The Russian delegation will include officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, including special presidential envoy on the Syria settlement Alexander Lavrentiev, Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Middle East and North Africa Department Sergey Vershinin and deputy head of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff Stanislav Gadzhimagomedov.

The United Nations special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura will also take part in the Astana talks.

What are chances of success?

"All parties understand that Astana is a milestone on the path to the Geneva peace process," Matuzov said, warning against calling the meeting a breakthrough. "However, the sheer fact that it is taking place is a positive development."

Sergei Demidenko, a researcher at the School of Public Policy of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), told RIA Novosti that Damascus and the armed opposition do not have much in common. In addition, Bashar Jaafari will have to negotiate with an array of groups, "some of which are more moderate and some are less so."

The political analyst described the Astana talks as a "preliminary phase" of a more broad-scale event. "In order to hold massive talks one has to understand whether they should be held under current conditions," he explained.

Demidenko further said that it is too early to hold talks in Geneva.

"The situation is extremely complex. It has become more complicated with every passing day. It is not clear with whom [Damascus] should negotiate. It is likely that the talks in Geneva will yield nothing," he said. *(Source: Sputnik)*

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Tips to strengthen your family's bonds

Bring your family closer and build a firm foundation

By Denise Witmer

Happy families have strong family bonds. As the leaders of the family unit, parents have to be responsible for strengthening and protecting these bonds. It doesn't happen naturally in our hectic day-to-day lives. You can create this firm foundation by committing to these essential practices that will strengthen your family's relationships:

As the leaders of the family unit, parents have to be responsible for strengthening and protecting these bonds.

Schedule family time

When you have teens, you will need to take a look at everyone's schedule.

Try to make a regular night, maybe once a week, when the entire family gets together for a fun activity. By keeping it on a regular schedule, everyone will know that they need to keep that night clear for family times. If you are going to plan a day trip, try to do it at least one month in advance. Post it on the family calendar and make sure that adults and teens are aware of the plan so they don't make other plans.

Eat meals together

Studies have shown that eating meals together helps reinforce communication. Choose a few nights during the week when you expect everyone to gather around the dinner table. Don't allow phones or other electronics, either. Just eat a meal and have a conversation together. If you unable to get together as a family for dinner because of busy schedules, try breakfast.

Do chores as a family

Make cleaning your home or caring for the yard a responsibility of the whole family.

Create a list of chores and have everyone sign up. Set up a time when everyone can tackle their chore at the same time. If your teens need a little more flexibility, give them a deadline to have their chore completed.

Create a mission statement

It may seem a little corny or too business-like, but it works.

A family mission statement can remind every family member about your core values or what you love most about each other. It is simple and fun to develop as a family (it's a great project for family night). Place your mission statement in a predominant place in your home. Read it and talk about it often.

Have family meetings

Family meetings are a good time for everyone to check in with each other, air grievances, or discuss future plans (like a vacation!). These can be scheduled events or you can make them impromptu and allow any member of the family to call a meeting if they feel the need. Start each of these meetings by reading your family mission statement. If you have a large family, you might also want to begin by asking if anyone has something for the 'agenda.' Write down what everyone wants to talk about and go through them one-by-one.

Encourage support

Family support is important and you can build this bond that will last your kids a lifetime, even when they're your age and after you're gone.

Encourage everyone to learn about things that are important to everyone else and to support each other through good and bad times. Share when something goes well at work. Ask your teen how their test went. Commiserate when your kid's team loses a game. Celebrate good grades and reward good behavior by doing something special together.

Take time for yourself

Parenting is a huge responsibility that you are required to fulfill every day. Even the U.S. Department of Labor requires companies to give employees two 10-minute breaks during a work day. Shouldn't you do the same? The reality is that you will be a better parent when you take some time just for you. Take a break and read a chapter in a book, go to the salon, or play a round of golf. Do something you enjoy, even if only for a few minutes.

Volunteer

Giving your time to make someone else's life better is always a powerful learning experience. Learning important life lessons together will strengthen the relationship you have with your children. Spending a day at the local food bank or a weekend building a home for charity will be valuable experiences you can share throughout your life. Volunteering is a positive experience and it's a good idea to demonstrate that with teens.

Get involved in your teen's interests

You don't have to be the coach, but you can help out with a fundraiser or be in charge of snacks for the bus on an away game night. Ask where you can help, it will show your teen you care about what they are interested in.

Join other families

Whether this is within your community or your church, being with other families will strengthen your own family bonds.

(Source: verywell.com)

Healthy eating for a healthy thyroid

You don't need to follow a special diet while on thyroid hormone medication, with a couple of exceptions. Avoid foods high in soy protein, which might interfere with the absorption of thyroid hormone. Also avoid excessive amounts of iodine, either in medications or supplements, as this could potentially alter your thyroid hormone level. Most iodine-rich foods, such as iodized products or fish, are acceptable. Aside from these restrictions, you are free to eat whatever you want, but aim for a healthy diet that includes lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Adopting a nutritious diet for your thyroid not only keeps you feeling good once your thyroid levels are normal, but it helps your digestive system function smoothly and your heart pump efficiently—both of which support healthy metabolism. If you still don't feel well despite your medication, improving your diet and starting an exercise program may help. Following are some tips for healthy eating.

Eat nutritious foods. Eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole-grain foods to improve your overall health. Protein should come from lean sources, such as fish or beans. Rely on healthy oils, such as olive oil.

Cut down on "bad" fats and simple carbohydrates. Certain dietary fats contribute to heart disease and some forms of cancer. Reduce saturated fats, which come mainly from animal products such as meat and cheese, and trans fats, which take the form of hydrogenated oils in processed foods and many margarines. Instead, choose fats that help reduce LDL cholesterol. These include monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats from vegetable oils, and omega-3 fats found in certain kinds of fish. Seeds, nuts, and legumes are also healthy choices.

Stick with complex carbohydrates found in whole-grain foods, fruits, and vegetables, and minimize soft drinks, potato chips, candy, crackers, and other junk foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients. Getting enough protein should not be a problem. Most people in developed countries get plenty of protein in their diets.

Increase dietary fiber. Dietary fiber helps improve digestion. Eating whole-grain foods and a variety of vegetables and fruits ensures that you have an ample supply of dietary fiber.

(Source: health.harvard.edu)

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Vacancy Announcement
Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Iran Office is seeking to fill the following vacant positions:

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Minimum Required Knowledge and Experience
• Job experience: Minimum of 3 years of project management OR relevant job experience in Iran
• Knowledge and Experience: Knowledge and experience on environment, agriculture, health, capacity Building, and public policy, public management or project management in the governmental/public/international organizations are desirable.
• Education: Minimum of Undergraduate (Bachelor) Degree
• Languages: Fluency in written and spoken Persian and English
• Other requirements: Must have basic know-how about IT trouble-shooting and mobile telecommunication, standard PC skills (Microsoft WORD, EXCEL, PowerPoint etc.). Must have good character and cooperate with others. General knowledge about JICA and Japanese ODA (Official Development Assistance) is preferable. Must be able to handle multiple tasks.

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Main Responsibilities
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Closing Date of CV Submission: 31 January 2017
All interested applicants should submit CV in English by Email: ia_oso_rep@jica.go.jp
ONLY SHORTLISTED CANDIDATES WILL BE NOTIFIED

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Tehran school to host handicraft expo, workshop for students

TT HERITAGE desk **TEHRAN –** The first exclusive exhibition of handicrafts as well as workshop for students will be held in Tehran on January 26 and 27.

The Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization is slated to hold the event at Peyvand school in northern Tehran, IRIB quoted Pouya Mahmoudian, the director of the CHTHO exports department as saying on Jan. 18.

An Iranian artisan forms an inlaid enamel bowl in an undated photo

Implementing such a scheme would be beneficial to craftspeople as it facilitates sustainable employment and spurs further thrive of the sector, Mahmoudian said.

A total of 13 stalls will offer a wide range of crafts that include paintings on leather and glass, felt products, kilims, traditional jewelry, leatherwork, semi-precious stones, glassworks, marquetry and embroidery, the official noted.

Based on recent statistics compiled by the CHTHO, Iran has exported handicrafts worth around $200 million since the beginning of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2016).

The official figures also suggest that exports of handicrafts have been on the increase over the past three years, witnessing an overall 59 percent of hike.

Thailand, Myanmar moot maritime tourism on Andaman coast

PHUKET (Bangkok Post) — Thai provinces on the Andaman Coast are keen to expand maritime tourism to Myanmar as part of regional efforts to draw more tourists to the two countries.

Tourism and sports permanent secretary Pongpanu Svetarundra held talks with Myanmar Minister for Hotels and Tourism Ohn Maung in the resort island on Sunday to follow up a memorandum of understanding on tourism cooperation signed between the two countries in Nay Pyi Taw two weeks ago.

It calls for collaboration on maritime tourism between Phuket, Phangnga, Krabi, Trang and Ranong in Thailand and coastal areas in Myanmar, with the focus on Myiek, a coastal town in the Tanintharyi region.

Iran seeks UNESCO recognition for Arasbaran protected area

TT TOURISM desk **TEHRAN —** Iran has put forward its Arasbaran protected area as a candidate for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage list for 2018.

The Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization has compiled a comprehensive file for possible inscription of the Arasbaran region on the UNESCO list, said Morteza Abdar, an official with the CHTHO.

The region enjoys distinctive characteristics as it embraces one of the oldest brick domes in the world, a relatively exact circular urban terrain and some vestiges of other historical monuments, Mehr news agency quoted Abdar as saying on Jan. 19.

Babak and Avarsin forts are amongst other historical sites across the area, located in the northwestern West Azarbaijan Province.

The Arasbaran protected area measures 78,560 hectares with a circumference of 134 kilometers. The altitude varies from 256 meters in the northern part to 2,896 meters which is the highest elevation in southern part of the area, according to the UNESCO website.

The region is of high importance due to its rich flora and fauna in particular presence of rare species. There can be found some endemic plant species including long-leaved trees such as Juniperus foetidissima and endangered species such as Taxus baccata.

Travelers visit Arasbaran protected area in northwest Iran in an undated photo. The region embraces rich vestiges of historical monuments.

According to the UNESCO website, in spite of permanent presence of tribes and domesticated animals there are variety of characteristic plant species. There are evidences that show Dinosaur fossils are frequent in this area .For example, some Dinosaurs fossils have already been found in Kharvanagh.

Iran's initial attempt on placing the protected area on the UNESCO list dates back to 2007.

Chinese tourism under scrutiny as Lunar New Year nears

SHANGHAI/BEIJING (Reuters) — With 6 million Chinese tourists expected to travel abroad over the Lunar New Year break, China's Jan. 27 to Feb. 2 holiday is crucial for Taiwan tour agency operator Li Chi-yueh, who relies on mainland visitors for a third of his revenue.

But Li's hopes are not high this year, after the number of mainland tourists plummeted 36 percent since President Tsai Ing-wen took power in May. Though Tsai says Taiwan wants peace with China, Beijing suspects she seeks formal independence.

"China uses its sightseeing tourists as a diplomatic weapon," said Li, owner of Taipei-based Chung Shin Travel Service, who has been representing Taiwan's tour operators to lobby Tsai to improve ties with Beijing. "There's a lot of concern that the industry won't survive if we carry on like this."

The concern is not confined to Taiwan - tour operators and government officials elsewhere in Asia say they fear China is using its increasingly high-spending tourists as a lever to pressure or reward its neighbors.

A government official from South Korea - which has irked China by agreeing to let the United States deploy an anti-missile system - said Chinese and Korean tour companies had told him the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) had instructed Chinese agencies to cut tours to South Korea by at least 20 percent between November and February.

The official calculated that thousands of potential travelers were lost after eight applications to add charter flights between the countries in January and February were rejected without explanation.

"This is not a win-win situation - it is mutually disadvantageous. But what can we do? As far as defense is concerned, we have no room to compromise," said the official, declining to be named due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Chinese companies told him the measure was designed to cut an excessive number of low-quality, low-priced tours for Chinese tourists visiting Korea, the official said. The CNTA did not respond to Reuters' requests for comment.

The number of Chinese tourists visiting South Korea inched up 1.8 percent on year in November, versus a 70.2 percent increase in August and a 22.8 percent rise in September. That was the worst since August 2015, when arrivals slid 32 percent after a Middle East Respiratory Syndrome outbreak.

In early November, the United States said it would deploy the anti-missile system battery in South Korea within eight to 10 months.

Call for Pre-qualification

Islamic Republic of Iran
Ministry of Energy
Khuzestan Water & Power Authority (KWPA)

Khuzestan Water and Power Company (KWPA) In compliance with law and regulations, intends to Evaluation of Bidders for Finance, Design and Build of The Main Irrigation and Drainage Network of Khuzestan Province with the following terms:

1. Location of the project: Khuzestan province
2. Methods of funding: Foreign financing
3. Estimated contract amount: 550 million euros (repayment of principal and interest of the finance facilities will be guaranteed by Plan and Budget Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in accordance with Article 62 of the Public Audit Law.)
4. Time schedule to carry out the work: 48 months.
5. Conditions of APPLICANTS TO APPLY FOR Pre-qualification: Consortium of Domestic and Foreign contractors who have adequate experience in the Design and Construction of Irrigation and Drainage networks comply with the following requirements and According to the rules and regulations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including Act on the Maximum Use of Iranian Technical, Engineering, Productive, Industrial and Executive Capabilities in Implementation of Projects... (adopted 1391 S.H) can participate in the qualitative evaluation:

Foreign contractors must have the appropriate Technical and Financial Requirements and must be approved by the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran and should submit the letter of Preliminary Agreements of the bank for financing of the 85% of total project amount, could participate with Domestic contractors meet the following conditions:

a. Domestic EPC Contractors which have the Grade 1 in Water
b. Participation of Domestic Contractors Grade 1 in water and Domestic Consultants Grade 1 in field of Irrigation and Drainage.

6. The place, time and respite provided to obtain tender documents: Eligible bidders can obtain the documents from Abkavosh Sarzamin Engineering Co. Central Office in Address: No. 26- Eqbal Alley, Reshadat Street, East Sarv Street- Saadat Abad- Tehran, on working time from Date 25th Jan. to 15th Feb. 2017. Document will be available only for those who have the letter of introduction and the document of money deposit to account number 102542207 of Tejarat Bank, Saadatabad Branch, belongs to Abkavosh Sarzamin Engineering Co. in the amount of 2,500,000 IRs.
7. The place, time and respite provided to obtain tender documents: Eligible bidders after obtain and study of the RFQ Documents must submit the Requested Evaluation Documents no later than 15th March of 2017, on working time in sealed package to the Secretariat, Ground Floor of Main Building of Khuzestan Water & Power Authority (KWPA)- Golestan Blvd- Ahvaz.

Public Relations of
Khuzestan Water & Power Authority (KWPA)

How to plan a volunteering vacation

A volunteering vacation can be a meaningful way to spend your time off, said Courtney Regan, the founder of the San Francisco travel company Courtney Regan Travel and an expert on what is known as volunteerism. But she added that there are several factors to consider to make the trip fulfilling and ensure that your efforts are productive both for you and the cause you're supporting.

Ms. Regan shares her advice on planning the ideal giveback getaway:

Support a personal cause

There are hundreds of causes to volunteer for, and finding one close to your heart will lead to a more worthwhile trip. "You're going to be working hard and likely staying in bare-bones accommodations, so you need passion to stick with your commitment," Ms. Regan said.

Possibilities include wildlife conservation, education, environmental sustainability, health and nutrition, and economic development. Also, consider any personal and professional skills that you can contribute; if you're a doctor, for example, working at a health clinic for the underprivileged in South Africa could be an ideal fit.

Choose a destination and setting

Your charitable getaway will be more enjoyable if you use it to reach a bucket-list destination; as a bonus, you'll get to see that destination with a unique perspective.

If Southeast Asia is on your mind, helping with reforestation in Bali would benefit the environment and let you appreciate the island's scenic setting. If Ecuador is of interest, possibilities include teaching English at a school in the picturesque Andean mountains or working at a community center in vibrant Quito.

And think about the surroundings you want; is volunteering outdoors in a tropical or snowy climate appealing, or do you prefer being in an air-conditioned office?

Ask the right questions

The more you know going into your trip, the more successful it will be, Ms. Regan said. Be aware that most volunteering programs require a weeklong commitment.

Ask if the cost includes only accommodations or meals and transportation too. Inquire about the sleeping situation; on many volunteer trips, travelers stay in dormlike settings with both men and women. Other questions: How many hours of work per day is required and are there days off; who you will report to; if you'll be working individually or as part of a team; and what the goals of your efforts are and how they will be assessed.

Work with a credible charity

Finding a reputable charity is important, Ms. Regan said. Charity Navigator is a watchdog for charities in the United States. Well-respected organizations that can help with worldwide volunteering opportunities include GivingWay, International Volunteer HQ and Volunteers for Peace, she said.

If you're looking for a daylong volunteering option, Ms. Regan said Give a Day Global was a good resource.

(Source: The New York Times)

Round the globe: Walled City of Baku

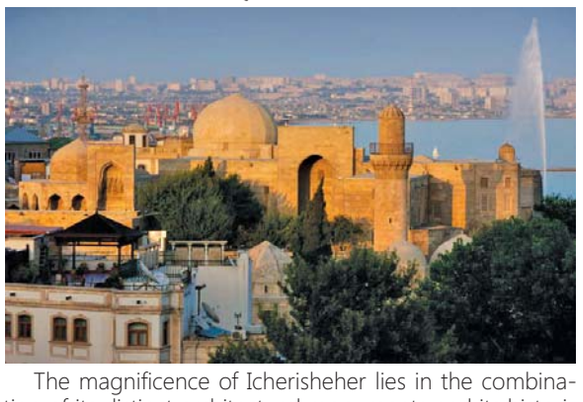
Rising from the south shore of the Apsheron Peninsular at the western edge of the Caspian Sea, the Walled City of Baku in Azerbaijan was founded on a site inhabited since the Paleolithic period.

The city reveals, along with the dominant Azerbaijani element, evidence of Zoroastrian, Sassanian, Arabic, Persian, Shirvani, Ottoman, and Russian presence in cultural continuity.

The inner city (Icherisheher) has preserved much of its 12th-century defensive walls, which define the character of the property. The most ancient monument of Icherisheher is the Maiden Tower – symbol of the city of Baku.

Some evidence suggests that the construction of the Tower might have been as early as the 7th-6th centuries BC. Another monument of universal value, one of the pearls of Azerbaijan's architecture is the 12th- to 15th-century Shirvanshahs' Palace, located at the highest point of Icherisheher.

There are also numerous historical-architectural monuments of the medieval period such as caravanserais, hamams (bath-houses), mosques and residential buildings of the 18th to 20th centuries located within the property.



The magnificence of Icherisheher lies in the combination of its distinct architectural monuments and its historically composed architectural spatial planning with original street views, which have merged into a single entity to reflect its long history and the melding of cultures that have influenced its development over the past nine centuries. Icherisheher is still a living, vibrant city with residential areas housing local communities. *(Source: UNESCO)*

What mackerel and a volcano can tell us about climate change

What could an Indonesian volcanic eruption, a 200-year-old climate disaster and a surge in the consumption of mackerel tell us about today's era of global warming?

A group of scientists and academics with the University of Massachusetts and other institutions made that assessment while conducting research about a long-ago calamity in New England that was caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora half a world away in 1815.

A cooled climate led to deaths of livestock and changed fish patterns in New England, leaving many people dependent on the mackerel, an edible fish that was less affected than many animals. The researchers assert that bit of history gives clues about what food security could be like in the modern era of climate change.

"How we respond to these events is going to be critically important for how we come out of this in the long term," said Karen Alexander, the lead author of the study and a research fellow in environmental conservation. "We can learn from the past how people dealt with the unanticipated."

The Tambora eruption was one of the most powerful in recorded history, and was followed by a short time of climate change — specifically, global cooling — and severe weather.

Tambora eruption

The research group's findings were published this month in the journal Science Advances. They looked at what the catastrophic Tambora eruption meant for the Gulf of Maine and nearby human food systems.

The Tambora eruption was one of the most powerful in recorded history, and was followed by a short time of climate change — specifically, global cooling — and severe weather. Its impact on weather, food availability and human and animals deaths worldwide has been studied extensively.

The researchers behind the Science Advances article found that alewives, a fish used for everything from fertilizer to food by 19th-century New Englanders, did not fare well. But mackerel had better survival rates and became a critical source of protein and jobs, Alexander said.

Crops failed

As crops failed and famine began to spread, the little fish emerged as a staff of life, the report states. It's a scenario similar to what parts of the developing world are experiencing today as climate change affects food security.

The study states there is a parallel between the need for immediate adaptation after Tambora and the challenges in coping with the climate-driven devastation caused by storms, floods and droughts today. It notes that the loss of food staples due to climate change caused people in the northeastern states to move.

"Understanding how adaptive responses to extreme events can trigger unintended consequences may advance long-term planning for resilience in an uncertain future," the report states.

How fisheries in the developing world will adapt to future climate change is an important contemporary food security issue, because fish are a vitally important protein resource worldwide.

(Source: AP)

SpaceX's upcoming rocket launch to use an expendable Falcon 9 booster

SpaceX's upcoming Falcon 9 launch, when it will deliver a 5.5 metric ton communications satellite for EchoStar Corporation to a geostationary transfer orbit, will be made using a reusable rocket, CEO Elon Musk confirmed in response to a question on Twitter on Saturday. The launch is scheduled to take place from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida no earlier than Jan. 30.

That launch is expected to be one of the last times — if not the last time — SpaceX would use an expendable Falcon 9 booster.

"Future flights will go on Falcon Heavy or the upgraded Falcon 9," Musk said on Twitter, adding that the upgraded Falcon 9 rocket — the Block 5 — "significantly improves performance & ease of reusability" and is likely to have its first flight by the end of 2017.

Falcon 9

The existence of the Block 5 version of Falcon 9 was first revealed by Musk in late 2015 during a Reddit AMA. At the time, Musk said since the booster was designed for easy reuse, "it just makes sense to focus on that long term and retire the earlier versions."

"Final Falcon 9 has a lot of minor refinements that collectively are important, but uprated thrust and improved legs are the most significant," Musk said during the AMA. The "big booster will have an easier time of things than Falcon, as the mass ratio of the stages is lower and it will have lower density. Net result is that it won't come in quite as hot and fast as Falcon, so Falcon should be a bounding case on the big booster."

The Falcon Heavy rocket, meanwhile, has been touted by SpaceX as the world's most powerful operational rocket.

Payload into orbit

According to the company, the rocket — whose first stage consists of three Falcon 9 engine cores — has the ability to lift a payload of over 54 metric tons into orbit.

SpaceX returned to flight after a four-and-a-half month gap on Jan. 14. The launch, which delivered 10 satellites to low-Earth orbit for the communications company Iridium, was the first since Sept.1, when an explosion destroyed one of SpaceX's Falcon 9 rockets and a $200 million AMOS-6 communications satellite it was carrying.

Saturday's successful launch puts SpaceX back on track toward fulfilling its space ambitions. The company currently has a backlog of over 70 missions, estimated to be worth over $10 billion. According to internal documents recently accessed by the Wall Street Journal, SpaceX hopes to fly as many as 27 times this year — much more than it has ever done in a single year.

(Source: IBT)

The speed limit for intra-chip communications in microprocessors of the future

Researchers at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology have developed a theory that gives the possibility to precisely predict the level of noise caused by the amplification of photonic and plasmonic signals in nanoscale optoelectronic circuits. In their research published in Physical Review Applied, the scientists propose an approach that can be used to evaluate the ultimate data transfer rates in the emerging optoelectronic microprocessors and discover fundamental limitations on the bandwidth of nanophotonic interfaces.

Surface plasmon polaritons are collective electron oscillations on a metal surface coupled to an electromagnetic field. A surface plasmon could be viewed as a compressed quantum of light, and that explains why plasmonic devices are very promising for many applications: They are almost as compact as nanoelectronic components, but at the same time, they enable up to four orders of magnitude higher data transfer rates than electrical wires. Replacing even some of the electrical interconnects on a chip with plasmonic (nanophotonic) components would give a much-needed boost to microprocessor performance.

The main obstacle

The main obstacle currently faced by plasmonics is signal attenuation. Due to high losses, surface plasmons can propagate over long distances only in so-called active plasmonic waveguides. Such waveguides not only guide the plasmonic signal from the transmitter to the receiver but also amplify it using the energy of the electric current flowing through the device. This added energy compensates for signal losses and allows surface plasmons to propagate freely along the waveguide, just like the energy supplied by a battery keeps a quartz clock ticking.

However, there is a fundamental problem associated with signal amplification and loss compensation. Every amplifier does not just increase the amplitude of the input but also adds some unwanted random signals. Physicists refer to these signals as noise. According to the laws of thermodynamics, it is impossible to remove all noise from a system. The distortion of the original signal is largely determined by noise, which fundamentally limits data transfer rates and causes errors in the received bits if information is transferred at higher rates. To increase the data transfer rate, the signal-to-noise ratio needs to be improved.

"Noise plays a key role in nearly half of all the devices in our homes: from cell phones and television sets to the fiber-optic channels that are the backbone of the high-speed internet. Signal amplification inevitably decreases the signal-to-noise ratio. In fact, the more gain an amplifier provides, or, in our case, the greater the signal loss it needs to compensate, the higher the level of noise it produces.

(Source: EurekAlert)

Brain study sheds light on changing of someone's political beliefs

Albert Einstein was one of the most important physicists of all time. His scientific predictions have withstood 100 years of scientific challenges. His thinking fundamentally changed the way we understand the universe. Yet people are more likely to be convinced Einstein wasn't a great physicist than to change their minds on topics like immigration or the death penalty.

It has nothing to do with a person's intelligence (or the quality of information on Einstein or immigration policy). It's due to the fact that we're simply more open to changing our minds on nonpolitical topics. Scientists have been keen to figure out why — because if they can, it may open the door to the hardest challenge in politics right now: changing minds.

Psychologists have been circling around a possible reason political beliefs are so stubborn: Partisan identities get tied up in our personal identities. Which would mean that an attack on our strongly held beliefs is an attack on the self. And the brain is built to protect the self.

Brain's responsibility

The "brain's primary responsibility is to take care of the body, to protect the body," Jonas Kaplan, a psychologist at the University of Southern California, tells me. The "psychological self is the brain's extension of that. When our self feels attacked, our (brain is) going to bring to bear the same defenses that it has for protecting the body."

Recently, Kaplan has found more evidence that we tend to take political attacks personally. In a study recently published in Scientific Reports, he and collaborators took 40 self-avowed liberals who reported having "deep convictions," put them inside in a functional MRI scanner, and started challenging their beliefs. Then they watched which parts of the participants' brains lit up. Their conclusion: When the participants were challenged on their strongly held beliefs, there was more activation in the parts of the brain that are thought to correspond with self-identity and negative emotions.

(Source: vox.com)

BMI Comes 1st among Top 500 Holding Firms in Country

Bank Melli Iran (BMI) won first rank among top 500 companies in the country in terms of sales, Public Relations Dept. of the bank reported.

As a leader economic enterprise, Holding Company of the bank managed to stand at the first rank among top 500 economic enterprises according to the financial statement (from March 19, 2015 to March 20, 2016).

BMI's holding company stood at the first rank in terms of sales, first rank in the group of finance and credit associations in terms of sales and also second rank in terms of value added index.

The report put the sales volume of BMI's Holding Company in the past Iranian calendar year in 1394 (ended March 19, 2016) at 364,657 billion rials.

As represented by the chief executive of the bank, the Plaque of Honor and statue of the Seminar was awarded to Habibollah Rashid Ardeh Public Relations Dept. Manager of the bank.

It should be noted that 19th Iranian Companies Ranking Seminar was held in IRIB Intl. Conferences Center according to the fiscal performance in 1394 (from March 19, 2015 to March 19, 2016) in the presence of senior managers and directors, economic policymakers and CEO of holding economic enterprises in the country.

Assessment and evaluation of top companies in the country is held every year by the Industrial Management Organization, the report ended.

People who swear tend to be more honest

I can probably count the number of times I've sworn on one hand — which might not be such a good thing, says a new paper suggesting that people who swear more tend to be more honest.

For a study published in Social Psychological and Personality Science, researchers ran a three-part experiment to find a connection between foul language and telling the truth. Overall, they found that the more you swear, the more you honest you tend to be, and this holds true at both the individual level and the society level.

First, the scientists recruited 276 participants online and asked all of them to report how often they swear (and how much they like it), as well as how honest they consider themselves on a variety of behavioral scales. Second, the scientists analyzed the Facebook statuses of nearly 75,000 people who used a certain app. In the last section, they looked beyond individual people and instead analyzed state-level profanity data compared to state-level integrity data. In all three conditions, more swearing equaled more integrity.

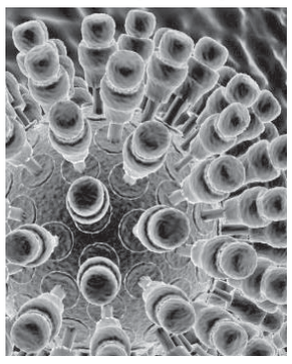
The usual caveats apply. Repeat after me: this is correlation, not causation, so it's not like swearing more makes you more honest.

Recruiting people online isn't always the most accurate way to get data and, of course, self-reports can be inaccurate. That said, the data was consistent, and it is easy to understand why there might be such a link. Swearing does come with a stigma, so people who are willing to swear a lot probably aren't too concerned with what others think, so the same trait that makes them swear might make them more likely to be honest.

(Source: The Verge)

Scientists have caught viruses talking to each other

Some of the greatest scientific discoveries have been accidental. Scientists have added one more. They've discovered for the first time an instance of viruses leaving messages for other viruses.



What makes the discovery remarkable is that scientists expect such communication systems to exist among other kinds of viruses. If true, we'll have one more route to attack devastating viruses, such as HIV or herpes.

The search began when Rotem Sorek of Weizmann Institute of Science and his colleagues were looking for "bacterial chatter."

They were studying how viruses attacked a bacterial species called Bacillus subtilis and they knew that, under certain situations, these bacteria communicate.

The phenomenon, called quorum sensing, helps bacteria control their behavior based on the number of other bacteria around. It's crucial in deciding, say, when a pathogenic bacteria decides to launch an attack on its host which could develop into a disease. What they found, however, was that the viruses were chattering too.

Viruses attack bacteria in two ways. Most of the time they enter the bacterial cell and take over its machinery to multiply until the cell explodes and dies. Sometimes, however, they simply inject their genome into the bacteria, waiting for an environmental cue to reawaken and multiply later.

Sorek's hypothesis was that, given how frequently viruses attack B. subtilis, perhaps the bacteria have developed a way of warning others when an attack begins. So he took a virus called phi3T and added that to a flask full of B. subtilis. As expected, viruses killed the bacteria in large numbers.

(Source: Quartz)

Here's how clever people become science deniers

Conspiracy theorists, people against vaccination and those who believe climate change is not happening are typically interested in science, but process information in a different way, psychologists say.

Science sceptics tend to follow a particular argument or message by cherry-picking the information that supports their established view, psychologist Matthew Hornsey of the University of Queensland, Australia, argues in a paper presented at a meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in San Antonio, U.S.

Hornsey calls this process "thinking like a lawyer", paying attention and giving weight to particular pieces of information to support the argument that they want to be true.

Those statements that counteract a science sceptic's established view are not dismissed as false, but simply have less importance attached to them, said Troy Campbell of the University of Oregon in the US, author of a related study.

"In our research, we find that people treat facts as relevant more when the facts tend to support their opinions," said Campbell. "When the facts are against their opinions, they don't necessarily deny the facts, but they say the facts are less relevant."

While science sceptics sift through information, they will select facts that best allow them to support or maintain their identity, according to another study author at the conference, Dan Kahan of Yale University in the U.S.

This process can be seen as a "state of disorientation that is pretty symmetric across the political spectrum", Kahan said. "Where there is conflict over societal risks – from climate change to nuclear-power safety to impacts of gun control laws, both sides invoke the mantel of science."

(Source: ibtimes.co.uk)

Air India says women-only seats for comfort

Air India will introduce women-only seats on its domestic flights to give female passengers more choice and comfort, said a senior official from the national carrier, rejecting claims the move was linked to reports of in-flight sex attacks.

From Wednesday, Air India will allocate six seats in the third row of its economy class cabin for solo women travelers - making it the only airline in India, and possibly the world, to take this step, said the official.

India already has policies which segregate women from men on public transport to avoid sexual harassment and molestation. Many trains - both underground and overground - have carriages reserved for women, and some buses have women-only seats.

"We are doing this as we get lots of requests by female passengers at the check-in counter who want to sit next to another woman, rather than a male passenger," said G. Prasada Rao, Air India's general manager for corporate communications.

"It is not connected to the reports of sexual assaults. It's more to do with the fact that economy class doesn't have much space to move around easily and comfortably for women, so this option will give them more choice."

Rao said that seats would be offered at no extra cost and would be available for up to an hour before check-in closed. The airline may also extend this policy to international flights, after measuring its effectiveness on domestic routes, he added.

(Source: Thomson Reuters Foundation)

RECIPE OF THE WEEK

Cabbage rolls

"Cabbage leaves stuffed with ground beef, onion and rice, covered in a sweet and tangy tomato sauce and cooked in a slow cooker."

Ingredients

12 leaves cabbage
1 cup cooked white rice 1 egg, beaten
1/4 cup milk
1/4 cup minced onion
1 pound extra-lean ground beef

1 1/4 teaspoons salt
1 1/4 teaspoons ground black pepper
1 (8 ounce) can tomato sauce
1 tablespoon brown sugar
1 tablespoon lemon juice

Directions:

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Boil cabbage leaves 2 minutes; drain.

In large bowl, combine 1 cup cooked rice, egg, milk, onion, ground beef, salt, and pepper. Place about 1/4 cup of meat mixture in center of each cabbage leaf, and roll up, tucking in ends. Place rolls in slow cooker.

In a small bowl, mix together tomato sauce, brown sugar, and lemon juice. Pour over cabbage rolls.

LEARN ENGLISH

Wanting Peace and Quiet

After three days of travel and meetings, I returned to my hotel room ready for some **downtime**. All I wanted was some peace and quiet so I could get a good night's sleep.

[phone rings]

Carl: Hello.

Hotel staff: Hello, Mr. Mendez. I'm calling to welcome you to our hotel. I hope you're finding everything to your satisfaction.

Carl: Yes, yes. Everything's fine. I just want to get some rest right now.

Hotel staff: Of course, Mr. Mendez. If there's anything we can do for you, don't hesitate to ask.

I hung up the phone and turned off the ringer. I didn't want any more unsolicited phone calls. But then, there was a knock on the door.

Hotel staff: Hello, sir. I'm here to turn down your bed. May I come in?

Carl: I don't need the bed turned down, thanks. Before I closed the door, I put the **do-not-disturb sign** on my door. I wanted no more **interruptions**. All of a sudden, a loud alarm **went off**. I opened my door and a hotel employee was explaining that there was a small fire in the kitchen and that the guests were being **evacuated**. We would have to leave the building immediately. I left my hotel room and wondered if there was a vast **conspiracy** to **rob me of my sleep** or if I'm just the unluckiest guy in the world!

(Source: eslpod.com)

Words & phrases

downtime: a period of time when you have finished what you were doing, and you can relax or do something that you had not originally planned to do to somebody's satisfaction: if something is done to someone's satisfaction, it is done as well or as completely as they want, so they are pleased unsolicited: not asked for and often not wanted turn down the bed: refers to the process of turning down the bed covers to prepare the bed to be slept in; turndown service is typically offered at high-end hotels and usually includes a brief cleaning and refreshing of the room

do-not-disturb sign: Used to indicate that somebody does not wish to be disturbed, e.g. a sign on a hotel room door

interruption: the act of stopping the continuous progress of (an activity or process)

go off: if an alarm goes off, it makes a noise to warn you about something

evacuate: to send people away from a dangerous place to a safe place

conspiracy: a secret plan made by two or more people to do something that is harmful or illegal

rob somebody of something: to take away an important quality, ability etc. from someone or something

Campaign aims to create jobs for vulnerable women

TT WOMEN desk

TEHRAN — A public campaign has been launched aimed at creating jobs for socially vulnerable women nearly two months before the new Iranian year starts on March 20.

The campaign with the motto of "Presenting a job, as the new year's gift" is arranged by the Society of Awareness, Knowledge and Growth (Bavar NGO) to create job opportunities for the women who are the breadwinners of their families, Mehr News Agency reported.

Bavar NGO has been providing cloths and foods for children of the needy families in the ending month of the year over the past 10 years.

This year, the Bavar NGO plans to establish a house of business to provide consultative and social work services for vulnerable women. They will be trained in different workshops in the fields of jewelries, pottery, sewing and leather works based on their talents.

The campaign invites generous people to bestow their charities to create jobs for vulnerable women.

End ban on women driving, UN expert tells Saudi

Saudi Arabia's government should end the kingdom's ban on women driving and reform the male guardianship system, a United Nations independent expert said on Thursday.

Philip Alston spoke at the end of a 12-day visit during which he met cabinet ministers, people living in poverty, activists, Islamic experts and others.

"My concern is that the government is in fact deferring to a relatively small portion of conservative voices," Alston told a news conference.

This is obstructing the economic and social progress which the oil-rich kingdom aims to achieve under its Vision 2030 wide-ranging reform program, said Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

"So I feel very strongly that the kingdom should move to enable women to drive cars," said Alston, an independent expert who reports to the UN's Human Rights Council.

He said features of the guardianship system which hinder women's ability to work and travel "need to be reformed."Under that system a male family member, normally the father, husband or brother, must grant permission for a woman's study, travel and other activities.

Officials have argued that society is not ready for women driving but Alston says the government must take an activist role.

"The role of the government is to work out how it can change the policy and how it can change attitudes," he said, calling for an educational campaign.

Alston, an Australian legal expert, said driving and guardianship are very much related to poverty. Women in low-paying retail jobs, for example, cannot afford to hire drivers.

He said he visited Jazan, in the kingdom's southwest, because it is the poorest part of the country, although there are "major problems" in the east as well.

In Jazan he found conditions "that I think would shock Saudi citizens." Most of those people in "extraordinarily poor conditions" there are Yemenis who arrived 50 years ago and — like other foreigners — do not have Saudi citizenship."There needs to be a plan to more systematically address their situation,"

Alston said, but most people he met in Saudi Arabia did not acknowledge that poverty exists in the world's biggest oil exporter.

He added that, although the government was very cooperative with his visit, he was given no data on the number of people considered poor.

"That is either an act of concealing the information that is available, or it's a serious indictment of the system."

Alston also called on the government to "liberalize" its approach to social media, after he received reports of "instances in which it has cracked down on certain people" communicating over the internet.

"I think the kingdom has long had an ambivalent relationship to human rights," but Vision 2030 is a chance for rights to be "a key part" of the progress which Saudi Arabia has embraced in so many areas, he said.

(Source: The Guardian)

Women's marches, the largest demonstration in U.S. history

Crowd estimates from Women's Marches on Saturday are still trickling in, but political scientists say they think we may have just witnessed the largest day of demonstrations in American history.

According to data collected by Erica Chenoweth at the University of Denver and Jeremy Pressman at the University of Connecticut, marches held in more than 500 U.S. cities were attended by at least 3.3 million people.

"Even using a conservative estimate, it was the single largest day for a demonstration in the U.S.," Chenoweth, an expert on political protests and civil resistance, told us.

Almost every state in America hosted a Women's March, as you can see in the map above. The events ranged from tiny gatherings in small town squares to throngs of more than 500,000 people clogging streets in cities like Washington, DC and Los Angeles.

Pressman said he started to track crowd numbers from organizers, local media outlets, and citizens who emailed or tweeted with links and reports early Saturday morning.

Chenoweth offered to help him, after being struck by how many people she saw at the march in her home town of Denver.

"It was much bigger than I expected and by the time I got home I was really curious if that was happening nationwide or not," said Chenoweth.

The researchers say much of their data is still incomplete and will change in the coming days as more estimates become available. Roughly 200 marches held across the U.S. still haven't released any attendance numbers yet.

But Chenoweth said she was stunned by how many communities across America held sister marches to the main event in Washington, DC. She and Pressman received data from places like Stanley, Idaho (population of 63), where nearly half the town — 30 people — came out to protest, including resident celebrity Carole King.

Half the town of Stanley, Idaho (pop. 63) came out in a snowstorm to march in peace & solidarity w/ men, women, & children on 7 continents.

(Source: Vox)

International Tender

No.: 95.T/850

*Security Printing and Minting Organization (SPMO) of Central Bank of I.R. of Iran in order to enhance the quality of its master dies for coin minting, intends to purchase one unit of **3D Laser Engraving Machine** and one set of spare and wear parts for three years, as well as installation at the site through a public tender from eligible companies, according to the specifications and conditions stated in the tender documents.*

Required documents:

1- *Bid Bond Guarantee will be issued by participants, according to the received documents in favor of SPMO, marked as Tender Guarantee.*

2- *The bidders are requested to submit their company profile, articles of association, turn over including list of supplied goods, client list, etc. for the last 3 years.*

For receiving tender documents, please contact us via the following address, telephone, e-mail or visit bellow website till 25th February, 2017.

Commercial Director.

Security Printing & Minting Organization

191, Pasdaran Ave. Tehran, Iran

P.O.BOX: 1664647111

Fax: +9821 22842033 – 22840053

Tel: +9821 23732303 – 304

Website: http://iets.mporg.ir

E-mail: spmo@cbi.ir

2973

Theresa May must explain Trident malfunction 'cover up,' say opponents

Labour and the Scottish National Party (SNP) say Prime Minister Theresa May must explain why Parliament was not told about a failed Trident missile test before a crucial vote on whether to renew Britain's aging nuclear weapons program.

Leading figures in both parties are set to use the incident, which occurred in June 2016 just weeks before a House of Commons vote on renewal, to attack the government. News of the missile malfunction only emerged on Sunday.

The SNP is committed to opposing it on the basis of safety and security, as the nuclear submarine fleet is based in Scotland.

The Labour leadership is opposed to nuclear weapons, but the majority of its parliamentary party is in favor of renewal.

SNP defense spokesman Brendan O'Hara told the BBC there are political and operational issues which must be addressed, but warned "this is not a national security issue."

"The government can't, as they love to do, hide behind the national security smokescreen. The public, who are paying over two hundred thousand million pounds [US$249 billion] for this renewal, have a right to know if it works or not," O'Hara said.

Labour's Shadow Defense Secretary Nia Griffiths said a full explanation is due, while Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell said it is "extremely worrying" that parliament had not been informed of the incident.

Likewise former Labour Defense Minister Kevan Jones told Labour List, "If there are problems, they should not have

been covered up in this ham-fisted way. Ministers should come clean if there are problems and there should an urgent inquiry into what happened."

In a car-crash interview on Sunday with the BBC, May refused to disclose whether she knew about the incident ahead of the vote on Trident. MPs ruled in favor of renewal by 472 votes to 117.

Instead she opted to say she had complete faith in Trident and that she thought "we should defend our country," with repeated references to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's opposition to Trident.

Senior military figures have also weighed in, with former head of the Royal Navy Lord West of Spithead writing in the Daily Mail that this had been a cover-up "worthy of North Korea."

"The decision to withhold news last summer that a Trident missile test experienced some kind of problem – ironically, almost certainly minor – is both bizarre and spectacularly stupid," West said in an opinion piece, urging Defense Secretary Michael Fallon to step up and explain.

Senior Tories have been attempting a fightback on the issue, with Business Minister Greg Clark telling Sky News "It's been the long-standing policy not to comment on tests of weapons systems and, if that's the approach that you take, I think we have to abide by that approach."

This argument somewhat falls down on the fact that successful tests are regularly reported, including with video of the launches.

Tory head of the Defense Committee Julian Lewis said as much in his intervention early on Monday.

"This sort of event is one that you can't play both ways ... whenever they work, which is 99 percent of the time, films are released of them working," he said.

Lewis said someone should be held to account for the decision.

"I always think with something like this it is better to lay it on the line ... In the end you have always got to assume that something like this will come out," Lewis said.

On Monday afternoon Kate Hudson, head of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) released a statement.

"It has become clear in the last 24 hours that the government acted to cover up a very serious incident involving Britain's nuclear weapons system," Hudson said.

"This calls into question the legitimacy of the Parliamentary vote on Trident replacement that took place in July 2016. MPs should have been told about the safety and reliability issues with the Trident system before they committed to spending £205 billion on a new version of the same technology.

"Both Parliament and public have the right to the truth, which is why we're calling for a Trident Inquiry. Thousands of letters have already been sent to MPs to demand that an inquiry is conducted. It's time for the government act," she urged.

(Source: RT)

Hamon, Valls lead in first round of French socialist primaries

French politicians Benoit Hamon and Manuel Valls are in the lead in the first round of the Socialist Party's primary elections in their quest to win the party's nomination for president in the 2017 polls, early results show.

Preliminary vote counts from the first round of the primary elections, which was held on Sunday, showed that the two were ahead of the other five participants.

If the final results match the early ones, Hamon, a former education minister, and Valls, who stepped down as prime minister in December 2016 to run in the socialist primaries, will take part in the run-off vote next Sunday to determine the sole socialist candidate in the presidential race, scheduled for April 23.

A total of seven candidates from the opposing wings of the leftists' party were in competition for the nomination. Apart from Hamon and Valls, politicians Francois de Rugy, Arnaud Montebourg, Sylvia Pinel, Vincent Peillon, and Jean-Luc Bennahmias were also running.

Meanwhile, polls suggest that the Socialists have little chance of winning the upcoming presidential election. Polls indicate that the Socialist Party candidate will be eliminated in the first round.

Observers believe the public is swayed by the right wing after almost five years of presidency by socialist Francois Hollande.

Analysts predict the main contenders for the post of president will be far-right leader Marine Le Pen, conservative ex-premier Francois Fillon, and Emmanuel Macron, a socialist-liberal-turned-independent.

(Source: AFP)

Taliban warn Trump over Afghanistan

The Taliban has warned President Donald Trump to reverse U.S. policy on Afghanistan or face a "historically shameful defeat", a U.S.-based monitoring group reported.

An article, which the SITE Intelligence Group said appeared on the Taliban's website and social media, described the freshly inaugurated leader of the free world as "an enigma both to the Americans and the billions of people around the world".

The article said that Afghans hoped Trump and his cabinet would not follow in the footsteps of previous White House administrations.

Afghanistan, which the U.S. invaded on October 7, 2001 in a bid to topple Al-Qaeda hosts the Taliban, has become Washington's longest military intervention since Vietnam.

It has also been the most costly, with more than $100 billion (93 billion euros) spent.

But the country remains wracked by insecurity as the resurgent Taliban dealt Afghan forces serious blows in 2015, the first year they led security operations in Afghanistan, taking over from NATO.

"Even though America has never waged a war so long and passionately intense in its entire history but if she insists on continuing her failed arrogant policies, one can foresee that she will ruin herself beyond repair due to a historically shameful defeat," the article said.

Trump has yet to make an official pronouncement about U.S. policy in Afghanistan, but the Taliban threat forced his predecessor Barack Obama to slow plans for a drawdown in U.S. troop numbers.

Some 8,400 will remain in the war-torn country this year, compared with 5,500 initially planned.

(Source: AFP)

Trump protesters facing 10 years in prison, heavy fine

Most of protesters who have been arrested for marching against U.S. President Donald Trump after his January 20 inauguration are facing 10-year prison sentences, federal prosecutors say.

A $25,000 fine is also awaiting the majority of the over 200 people who were arrested during Friday's violent protests, where people started vandalizing public property as the Republican leader was being sworn in.

Police used tear gas, stun grenades, water cannon and pepper spray to subdue the protesters before arresting some of them on "felony rioting" charges.

Washington, DC law describes "felony rioting" as a situation where five or more people cause "serious bodily harm" or more than $5,000 of damage to property through "tumultuous and violent conduct and the threat thereof."

All of the 217 protesters stood before the state's Superior Court on Sunday.

Many of the arrestees were wearing anti-fascist "black bloc" hoods and masks when they were arrested. They are accused of smashing windows, throwing bricks at cop cars and vandalizing a nearby limousine.

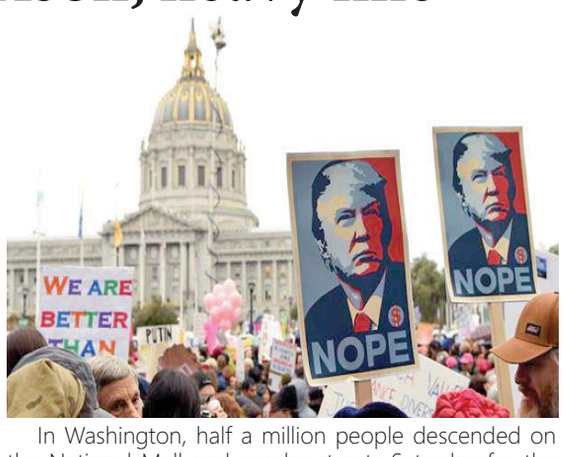
At least one of the protesters told the court that he was a journalist for a news website and police should not have detained him.

According to the U.S. Attorney's Office, nearly all of the protesters have been released without bail. They should avoid being arrested again before going on Trial in February and March.

Upon leaving the police station, the protesters were met with a small group of protesters who were chanting "anti-capitalista" in their support.

People across the U.S. and around the world held rallies to show solidarity with the massive Women's March on Washington on Saturday, which reportedly drew over 2 million people in U.S. cities.

Over 630 different events were held in different cities from European capitals to Asian and African cities, where people urged the Trump administration to uphold women's rights and avoid discrimination against immigrants and racial minorities.



In Washington, half a million people descended on the National Mall and nearby streets Saturday for the historic march, eclipsing the turnout for Trump's inauguration the day before, according to city officials.

(Source: Press TV)

Iran and Saudi Arabia struggle to reconcile differences

1→ The Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia that all Muslims must undertake. Currently Iranians are banned from it, however, due to the Saudi-Iranian conflict.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir responded to the Iranian statements by saying that Riyadh's relationship with Tehran is tense, and that it is in fact Iran that should stop its "hostile actions" in the region.

DW spoke with Saudi political analyst Muhammad Abdullah Al-Zulfa to get the Saudi side of the story. "Riyadh's terms are clear in this regard" he told DW. "Iran should refrain from interfering in internal affairs of countries in the region." Al-Zulfa, a former member of Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, said that "Saudi Arabia would welcome any rapprochement from the Iranian side."

Stark differences

After a stampede in Mecca killed hundreds of mostly Iranian Hajj pilgrims in 2015, Iran said that the Saudi Arabians were incompetent and boycotted the Hajj to Saudi Arabia that year. At the beginning of 2016, ties worsened again when Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr was executed by Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's solution to prevent stampedes during the Hajj has been using electronic bracelets on participants to monitor the crowds and prevent congestion. The Saudi Arabians coordinate with other countries to receive a certain number of pilgrims to prevent overcrowding.

Trump administration

Hassan Rorian, the Iranian affairs expert, told DW that the incoming Trump administration, "doesn't align with either Iranian or Saudi interests."

He also said that "Saudi Arabia is losing a war of attrition in Yemen against the Houthi rebels. They have inflamed the situation in Bahrain and suppressed the will of the people. They tried to send a representative to meet Trump, but were rejected." He mentioned that they should cooperate with Saudi Arabia to end this impasse. The two countries could find mutual ground over Trump's discontent with their policies.

Zarif concluded that there should be no reason for hostility between the two states. He said they can "work together to end the tragic situations in Syria, Yemen and other countries."

Normalization between the two countries is still a good distance away and past hostilities could mean that any attempt at rapprochement will not succeed.

The Gambia: Ex-ruler Yahya Jammeh 'plundered coffers'

The Gambia's ex-ruler, Yahya Jammeh, plundered the state coffers in his final weeks in power, stealing millions of dollars and shipping out luxury vehicles by cargo plane, according to an aide to new president Adama Barrow.

Jammeh, who ruled the small West African country for 22 years, flew into exile late on Saturday to Equatorial Guinea.

He had refused to concede defeat in a December 1 election but eventually relinquished power after a delegation of West African leaders convinced him to step down, even as troops from neighboring countries entered The Gambia.

On Sunday, hundreds of Banjul residents cheered a military force by ECOWAS, the West African regional bloc, as it entered the capital to provide security and allow Barrow, who has been in neighboring Senegal for more than a week, to return and take power.

But amid growing controversy over the assurances offered to Jammeh to guarantee his departure, Barrow adviser Mai Fatty said the new administration had discovered that millions of dollars had recently been stolen.

"The coffers are largely empty," he told reporters in the Senegalese capital, Dakar.

"Over two weeks, over 500m dalasi ($11 million) were withdrawn" by Jammeh, he said. "As we take over, the government of The Gambia is in financial distress."

Fatty also said that a Chadian cargo plane had transported luxury goods out of the country on Jammeh's behalf, in his final hours in power, including an unknown number of vehicles.

Barrow's aide said officials at the Banjul airport have been ordered not to allow any of Jammeh's belongings to leave.

Fatty also said the president is eager to return to The Gambia "as soon as possible", warning, however, that "the state of security in The Gambia is still fragile."

'No legislative measures'

The regional military operation was first launched late on Thursday after Barrow was sworn in as president at Gambia's embassy in Senegal, but it was halted hours later to give Jammeh one last chance to leave peacefully.

His departure followed two days of negotiations led by Guinea President Alpha Conde and Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania, prompting speculation over what, if any, terms were agreed upon to convince him to step down.

"He wanted to stay in Gambia," Barrow told radio station RFM in Senegal. "We said we couldn't guarantee his security and said that he should leave."

Barrow, who says he plans to establish a commission to investigate alleged human rights abuses by Jammeh's regime, denied that the former ruler had been offered immunity from prosecution in exchange for leaving the country.

Critics have raised concerns over the wording of a statement issued by the United Nations, ECOWAS and the African Union that seemed to offer Jammeh comfortable guarantees for his future.

"No legislative measures" would be taken that would infringe the "dignity, security, safety and rights" of Jammeh or his family, it said, noting that property "lawfully" belonging to him would not be seized.

Equatorial Guinea is not a signatory to the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court, meaning Jammeh would not be extradited in the event he was charged with crimes against humanity or other serious offences.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

HRW warns new executions may occur in Bahrain in unfair trials

1→ **Bahrain court adjourns trial of Nabeel Rajab**

Also on Monday, a Bahraini court postponed until February 21 the trial of prominent human rights campaigner Nabeel Rajab.

Rajab was arrested in June 2016 over tweets he had posted in March 2015 criticizing the Manama regime for torturing prisoners at a local jail and for its involvement in the deadly Saudi aggression against Yemen.

According to state media, Rajab is accused of "spreading false news and rumors and inciting propaganda during wartime." He categorically denies the charges.

Bahraini courts have repeatedly rejected requests to release the 52-year-old rights campaigner over health problems. The United Nations (UN) has called on Bahrain to "immediately and unconditionally" release Rajab.

Bahrain, a close ally of the US, has been experiencing a wave of anti-regime demonstrations since mid-February 2011. Scores of people have been killed and hundreds of others injured or detained amid Manama's ongoing crackdown on dissent and widespread discrimination against the country's Shia majority.

(Source: Press TV)

Trump will look fool if he pulls out of international nuclear deal: Lendman

'Trump can't have better relations with Russia by antagonizing China and Iran'

1→ Trump has no public record on which to judge him. We'll have to wait how he'll govern. He's called NATO obsolete, wants it used to fight terrorism, not overthrow governments, and wants all 28 members to pay their fair share. America currently funds around 75% of NATO.

It was always about offense, not defense, especially after Soviet Russia's dissolution. It's a killing machine used by Washington to advance its imperial agenda. I hope Trump will reign it in but who knows.

Man United boss Jose Mourinho: It's not easy to change this team

Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho has said it would be difficult to make changes to his side despite recent dropped points due to the quality of the players' performances.

United's nine-game winning run in all competitions ended when they drew 1-1 against Liverpool at Old Trafford and that was followed by another 1-1 draw, away against Stoke City, on Saturday.

Anthony Martial, last season's top scorer, was not selected in the matchday squad at Stoke.

Mourinho told reporters: "Sometimes we are playing so well and creating chances -- it is not easy to make changes.

"It is easy to make changes when you see players not playing well, when you see a team not playing well. I change trying to give a different direction to the game."

United had 25 shots against Stoke, while the home team managed six, and it continued a recurring theme this season of pressure not being turned into goals.

Juan Mata missed the best of the chances, shooting over from close range -- and also scored an own goal -- before Wayne Rooney eventually equalised late on for Mourinho's side.

The United manager said: "A top team has to be much more clinical. You have to get the first chance of the match and 'bang,' 1-0. When you are winning by a goal then, the next chance, ‹boom' -- kill the opponent. And we are not doing that enough.

"We did that in a couple of matches but even in the matches that we won, if I remember for example Middlesbrough and Crystal Palace, it is always hard to score goals."

Speaking in his postmatch news conference after the Stoke game, he said: "I've been saying for a long, long time that one day we will score every chance of the match and somebody will go home with six or seven goals in the basket but the reality is that day never arrives and we always struggle so much to score goals.

"We hit the post, the goalkeeper saves, we miss the easy chance, and then in the end, we risk losing the match -- by scoring an own goal -- and we had to wait until minute 90-something to equalise."

(Source: ESPN)

Bayern Munich's Arturo Vidal: I need 'a break' to recover in time for Arsenal

Bayern Munich midfielder Arturo Vidal says he "feels bad" and "must take a break" if he is to have any chance of playing in the Champions League against Arsenal next month.

Vidal, 29, initially suffered a rib injury during Bayern's 2017 Telekom Cup success during their winter break on Jan. 14.

But the Chile international was passed fit to play in the Bundesliga champions' first competitive game of 2017 against Freiburg on Friday, despite missing most of last week's training due to injury.

Vidal, however, aggravated his rib problem in Bayern's 2-1 win and was replaced by Germany international Joshua Kimmich 10 minutes after the interval.

"I feel bad," Vidal told tz. "I've got severe pain in the ribs. I can't play like this and must take a break now.

"Anyway, I've already missed a week's training. Now it looks like I'll need at least a further two or three weeks' break."

Bayern play Arsenal on Feb. 15 in the first leg of their Champions League round-of-16 tie at the Allianz Arena.

"Only by doing this can I completely recover," Vidal added. "Then we will see how I feel for the Champions League game."

(Source: ESPN)

Barcelona lose Busquets to sprained ankle

Barcelona midfielder Sergio Busquets sprained his right ankle in the 4-0 victory at Eibar, the La Liga club said on Monday.

The Spain international was carried off in the eighth minute of Sunday's game following a challenge from Eibar's Nicolas Escalante.

"Results on Monday confirm that Busquets has a sprained external lateral ligament in his right ankle," Barca said in a statement.

"The player is out and his return will depend on his recovery."

Barcelona face Paris St Germain on Feb. 14 in the first leg of their Champions League last 16 tie and will hope to have the 28-year-old available.

Busquets has played 27 of Barcelona's 32 games in all competitions this season.

Barca, third in La Liga and two points adrift of league leaders Real Madrid, who have a game in hand, host Real Sociedad on Thursday in the King's Cup quarter-final second leg holding a 1-0 advantage.

(Source: Reuters)

Federer ready to restore order against Zverev

Seeing world number 50 Mischa Zverev and wildcard Denis Istomin upset the top two players in the world at Melbourne Park shows more players believe they can take shake up the established order and that can only be good for tennis, says Roger Federer.

Zverev's win over world number one Andy Murray on Sunday came on the heels of Istomin's second round victory over six-times champion Novak Djokovic, results which not only surprised Federer but saw the odds of him winning the title shortened.

"I never thought that Mischa Zverev and Denis Istomin would beat those two big guys," said 17-times grand slam champion Federer, who will play Zverev on Rod Laver Arena on Tuesday.

"I guess it's good for tennis that a lot of guys believe stronger now that the top guys are beatable, are vulnerable, especially on a faster court.

"But two huge surprises. No doubt about that."

Federer added that he would practice against a left-hander before the clash with Zverev, who charged Murray at the net and put the Scot off his rhythm from the baseline in their fourth-round encounter.

"Obviously he's on a high right now. He's feeling great," the Swiss said of Zverev. "Probably feels the best he's ever felt on a tennis court.

"It's going to be tough and different and tricky."

Things will not get any easier for Federer should he get past the 29-year-old German, with compatriot Stan Wawrinka or Jo-Wilfried Tsonga waiting for him in the last four.

Tsonga said he was taking it one match at a time.

"It's going to be a tough match," he said of Wawrinka. "I know he's playing really good.

"If I win, another opponent, and if I win, another one, so ... the most important thing for me is to be focused on the next opponent."

In the women's quarters, Venus Williams has the chance to send a positive message to all the veterans at the tournament when the 36-year-old takes on Russia's Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, 11 years her junior, in the first match on Rod Laver Arena.

Williams could meet her younger sister Serena in a ninth grand slam final if they both get through the draw but she is refusing to think about that scenario just yet.

She would first have to get past Coco Vandeweghe or French Open champion Garbine Muguruza in the last four.

"She's a tricky player," Muguruza said of the 25-year-old Vandeweghe. "She has a lot of power, full shots, serve, everything. She can play very well."

(Source: Reuters)

Dortmund beat Real Madrid to €10m signing of Swedish wonderkid Alexander Isak

Borussia Dortmund have signed AIK's highly rated teenager Alexander Isak for €10m (£8.65m). The 17-year-old, who became Sweden's youngest ever goalscorer earlier this month, looked set to be joining Real Madrid last week but had a change of heart and opted for the Bundesliga club.

Dortmund have gained a reputation for being one of the best clubs in Europe for young players, having signed and given first-team opportunities to players such as Christian Pulisic (18 years old), Ousmane Dembélé (19), Julian Weigl (21), Emre Mor (19) and Raphaël Guerreiro (23).

The Borussia Dortmund sporting director, Michael Zorc, said: "Alexander Isak is a hugely-talented striker, who many top clubs in Europe wanted to sign. We are delighted that he has chosen Borussia Dortmund. Both BVB and the player himself are convinced that this transfer has great potential."

Isak and his advisers, who were in Dortmund on Sunday to conclude the deal, are also likely to have looked at the struggles of another Scandinavian prospect, Martin Odegaard, who has found it difficult at Real Madrid since joining the club as a 16-year-old in January 2015. The Norwegian has made one appearance for the club and joined Heerenveen in the Netherlands on loan this month.

Isak scored 10 league goals in 24 appearances for AIK during the 2017 Swedish season, including two in the derby against Djurgarden on this 17th birthday, and became Sweden's youngest ever goalscorer when he found the net against Slovakia on 12 January, beating a 105-year-old record in the process.

He had become the second youngest player ever to represent his country four days previously when he made his debut against Ivory Coast and the Sweden national coach, Janne Andersson, said after the two games: "Isak is rewriting history and I am not surprised. I knew that he would do well. He is calm and incredibly stable. It's been fun to get to know him."

(Source: Guardian)

Klopp frustrated as Liverpool's transfer plans stall

Manager Juergen Klopp has bemoaned Liverpool's lack of progress in the January transfer window following their first home defeat of the season, saying he has identified his targets but clubs are not willing to sell.

Liverpool were stunned 3-2 by a struggling Swansea City in the Premier League on Saturday, a result that saw them slip to fourth in the table, 10 points behind leaders Chelsea.

Liverpool, who have temporarily lost influential winger Sadio Mane to the African Nations Cup, are yet to sign a single player so far in January.

"I understand it is absolutely normal that people ask whether we should have brought players in," the German told British media.

"The situation is yes, on the one side pretty simple, but on the other hand it is pretty difficult. It is not that we don't want to bring players in. We do.

"But the thing is, the players we want because we think they help us, the clubs don't sell. It is not about money in this situation, it is the winter transfer window."

Liverpool have won just one of six games in 2017, and Klopp indicated that the club had missed out on their targets despite being willing to offer a premium on any players they were looking to sign.

"Clubs are saying 'No, we have half a year to go, we cannot find another player like this, we prefer to take money in the summer than a few pounds more in the winter than whatever,'" he added.

"You see the situation. It's tight, it's close, we know that, but if the right decision is not possible in signing the right player then you cannot make the wrong transfer.

"It's not as if there are 20 players out there who could make this team stronger, who are running around and are available. That is the situation. That is why I say we know the situation, we are prepared to move, but for the right player."

(Source: Reuters)

Instagram

@d_degeaofficial Focus on training ...

@da_27good vibes .. good times .. #savage ...

@nurisahinHappy Birthday #ratinho I am proud to call you a true friend ...

Persepolis edge Gostaresh, Esteghlal Khuzestan hold by Sepahan

TT SPORTS desk Persepolis restored their four-point lead at the top of the Iran Professional League (IPL) after edging past Gostaresh Foolad 1-0 in front of more than 25000 fans at Tehran's Azadi stadium on Monday.

Mehdi Taremi was on target for Persepolis in the 76th minute with a massive shot from inside the penalty box.

Elsewhere in Ahvaz, IPL reigning champions Esteghlal Khuzestan were held to a 1-1 draw against Sepahan.

Masoud Hassanzadeh scored for Sepahan in the 25th minute from the penalty spot but Esteghlal Khuzestan's new signing Aloys Nong scored the equalizer just before the half time.

The hosts could have completed their come back in the 80th minute when the referee awarded them a penalty but Mehdi Momeni missed it as the game finished in a draw.

In Isfahan, Zob Ahan beat Foolad 1-0 thanks to a first half goal by Mohammadreza Hosseini. They are now in the third place, five points behind second spot Tractor Sazi.

Elsewhere, Padideh and Naft played out a goalless draw and Saipa defeated Siah Jamegan.

Persepolis are currently at the top with 41 points followed by their main title rivals Tractor Sazi with 37 points. Zob Ahan, Esteghlal and Sepahan are three to fifth respectively.

Iran U23 wheelchair basketball victorious over Thailand, India

TT SPORTS desk Iran wheelchair basketball team defeated Thailand and India in the U23 Asia Oceania Zone qualifying tournament for the U23 World Championships.

Iran defeated host Thailand 73-41 Monday morning and earned their second victory over India, beating the team 89-7.

Six countries are participating in the championship, which started on Monday in Bangkok, Thailand.

The six teams from across the Zone are competing for three spots at the U23 World Championships in Toronto this June. The competing teams are: Thailand, Iran, Australia, China, India and Japan.

Traditionally Australia, Iran and Japan have been favorites to win the tournament. However at the last Zone tournament China showed that they are also to be taken as a serious opponent when they defeated Japan in their final pool game but after a successful Kitakyushu Cup last December, Japan are expected to continue their strong form in the tournament in hope to guarantee them a place at the U23 World Championships.

The tournament promises to have high level games with many close results. A simple loss of concentration from any team could easily see them eliminated from the medal round and consequently miss the opportunity to go to Canada.

Iran women's volleyball coach optimistic over AVC qualification tournament

Majda Cicic, the head coach of the Iran women's volleyball team, is optimistic over a good performance at the 2018 FIVB Women's World Volleyball Championship Qualification Tournament for the AVC Central Zone.

The competition will take place in the Maldives from January 27 to 29.

"We will participate in the event to win the championship. The all participants are well-prepared but we also are ready to qualify for the 2018 FIVB Women's World Volleyball Championship," Cicic told the reporters.

"Our players trained for three months and we are ready to take part at the event. I don't care who we play in the tournament. We prefer to stay in a good concentration about our team," she added.

Iran, India, the Maldives and Nepal have already confirmed their participation in the three-day tournament.

Only the top team in this competition will qualify for the next round due to take place later next year.

(Source: Tasnim)

Iran's Ali Karimi to join NK Lokomotiva Zagreb

Iranian midfielder Ali Karimi will leave Dinamo Zagreb to join NK Lokomotiva Zagreb on loan until the end of the season.

He has been also linked with move to Iranian clubs Sepahan and Persepolis.

Karimi will finalize his contract by the end of the week.

NK Lokomotiva Zagreb is seventh in the Croatian football league.

On July 1, 2016, Karimi joined Dinamo Zagreb from Iran's Sepahan on a five-year contract for a reported US$400,000 transfer fee.

He is the first Iranian to play in Croatian Prva HNL.

The 22-year-old midfielder made his league debut on 13 August 2016, coming on as second half substitute in a 2–1 victory against Inter Zapresic.

(Source: Tasnim)

Bulgarian volleyball coach Stoychev in Tehran for talks with IRIVF officials

Former Bulgarian volleyball player and head coach Radostin Stoychev has arrived in Tehran to hold negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran Volleyball Federation (IRIVF) officials, and assess chances to take charge of Iran men's national volleyball team.

Stoychev arrived at Imam Khomeini International Airport on Sunday evening, and was greeted by the IRIVF Secretary Mahmoud Afshardoust, acting head coach of the national Iranian volleyball team Amir Khoshkhabar, head of the IRIVF International Committee Maysam Ja'fari as well as a resident Bulgarian diplomat upon arrival.

The 47-year-old expressed his and the Bulgarian nation's heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims of the collapsed Plasco high-rise in downtown Tehran.

Up to 30 people, most of them firefighters, are believed to have been trapped under the rubble of the building, which caught fire on Thursday morning and came down hours later. Rescue teams have so far managed to recover six dead bodies.

During his five-day stay in Tehran, Stoychev is scheduled to engage in negotiations with IRIVF authorities, survey Iran's volleyball installations and closely monitor a number of the Iranian Volleyball Super League fixtures.

The IRIVF refused to renew the contract of Iran national volleyball team coach Raul Lucio Lozano after the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Iran finished fifth in the games under Lozano's tutelage.

(Source: PressTV)

AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019™ logo revealed

The official logo for the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 was launched in the capital Abu Dhabi on Monday.

With the new visual identity now unveiled, excitement is growing amongst fans across the continent and beyond as they follow their team's road to the final tournament in January 2019 in the United Arab Emirates.

Introduction of the UAE flag colours

The colour palette consisting of black, green, red and white honours the UAE flag. The coloured ribbons are bound together to create seven hexagons, each hexagon symbolising one of the seven UAE Emirates that came together in harmony to form the spirit of the union 45 years ago.

Traditional pattern

An Islamic pattern brings regional culture and the local traditional craft of weaving to the heart of the logo identity. The dynamic logo was inspired by thousands of years of Islamic art which is represented and embodied through the pattern forming the core of the logo.

The interlacing hexagons signify the UAE's cultural heritage of weaving – the old tradition of using Saf (palm leaves) to produce objects of beauty still seen today. The outer circle embraces geometric design creating a tribute to the great game of football that is set to unite the Asian continent in the UAE in two years' time.

(Source: AFC)

Nadal thrilled by return to grand slam quarter-finals

Rafa Nadal returned to the grand slam big-time by weathering a furious Gael Monfils fightback to win 6-3 6-3 4-6 6-4 and reach the Australian Open quarter-finals on Monday.

Former champion Nadal had not reached the last eight in a major since the 2015 French Open, so he celebrated wildly after closing out the two-hour 56-minute clash at a packed Rod Laver Arena.

It was not the most convincing of wins for the 30-year-old Spaniard, who became rattled when sixth seed Monfils rallied brilliantly in the third set and went up 4-2 in the fourth.

But Nadal summoned the resilience of his halcyon days to win four straight games and keep his pursuit of a 15th grand slam title alive.

Novak Djokovic may be absent after his shock second-round elimination but third seed Milos Raonic looms as a massive roadblock to Nadal's hopes of a first grand slam semi-final since winning his last French Open in 2014.

"For me, it means a lot because I really start the season playing quarter-finals in a grand slam again, especially on a hard court (and) after a couple of years without being in this round is great news," ninth seed Nadal told reporters, still bathed in sweat after his work on a muggy evening.

"Very happy with an important victory against a very good opponent.

"When you lost the third (set), you are down 4-2 in the fourth, you are not under control, no. That's the real thing."

Monfils came into the match with a 12-2 losing record against Nadal and the flamboyant Frenchman started as if weighed down by the history.

He was broken early in each of the first two sets and made his plight worse with some bizarre shots and mystifying decision-making.

He hammered a pair of blazing winners to save set points in the second set but threw it away with a dismal drop shot.

Nadal appeared on course to coast to a comfortable win but he came unstuck at 4-4 in the third set, double-faulting to hand Monfils a free point then pounding a forehand over the baseline.

Monfils clinched the set with a blazing forehand winner and strutted back to his chair with an index finger pointed at his temple.

Saving two break points and survived a marathon fourth game, an inspired Monfils pounding away at Nadal's serve like a heavyweight boxer.

Nadal fired back with interest and it took a low blow for him to be broken when an unlucky net cord gave him no chance.

The Spaniard leapt to his feet to break back in the eighth game, however, pulling Monfils wide across court before slamming a two-hand backhand into the vacant corner to level at 4-4.

The roar from the crowd almost lifted the stadium's closed roof and Nadal jumped high and pumped his fist in triumph.

The moment felt like a turning-point and so it proved.

Monfils promptly crumbled on serve, bowing out on the second match point with a huge backhand that flew just wide of the line.

(Source: Reuters)

Sampaoli sets new standard at Sevilla

Sevilla coach Jorge Sampaoli has taken less than seven months to make his mark at the Spanish team after steering them to a club-record 42 la Liga points at the halfway stage of the season.

Sampaoli's side came from behind to win 4-3 at Osasuna on Sunday, beating their 39-point haul from 19 league games in the 2014-15 campaign under former coach Unai Emery.

Emery, now in charge of Paris St Germain, led Sevilla to 76 points that season, the most in the 126 year-history of the Andalusian club and Sampaoli now has that total in his sights.

"It's going to be difficult but we will try to do it," Sampaoli told reporters.

Sevilla's lone La Liga title came in 1945-46 and they have been runners-up four times, the last 60 years ago.

They have, however, captured nine trophies since 2000, including a record five Europa League titles and three in a row under Emery.

Sampaoli, who guided Chile to Copa America glory in 2015, beating a Lionel Messi-led Argentina in the final, is in his first coaching job in Europe.

The Argentine has steered Sevilla to the Champions League last 16 and to second spot in La Liga, one point behind leaders Real and one clear of Barcelona, mainly due to their prolific forwards.

"A lot of the points that we have has to do with our attack," Sampaoli said.

Sevilla's 42 goals make them the third most prolific team in La Liga, behind Barcelona (51) and Real Madrid (48) and they have dropped only three points in nine games at their Sanchez Pizjuan stadium, the division's best home record.

They have also prospered on their travels with Sunday's win their fifth in 10 away games.

Only third-place Barcelona have done better, the Catalan club having taken 23 points away from the Nou Camp in 10 games.

(Source: Reuters)

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Poem of the day

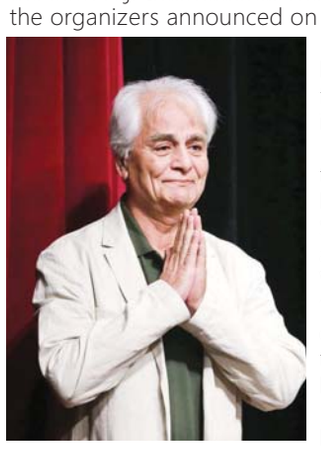
The wind had in the shade of its trees
Spread out a bed of all kinds of flowers.
Sadi

Prayer Times

Noon:12:16 Evening: 17:43 Dawn: 5:42 tomorrow) Sunrise: 7:09 (tomorrow)

Fajr theater festival to honor Ali Rafiei

TT ART desk **TEHRAN —** Veteran stage and cinema director Ali Rafiei will be honored with a lifetime achievement award at the closing ceremony of the 35th Fajr International Theater Festival on January 31, the organizers announced on Monday.



Director Ali Rafiei in a file photo (Mehr/ Mohammad Moheimani)

Born in 1938 in Isfahan, Rafiei got a Ph.D. in theater from Sorbonne University in France in 1974.

He is the director of the acclaimed plays "Fox Hunting", "It Does Not Snow in Egypt", "Crime and Punishment", "Blood Wedding", "The Maids", and "Nightmares and Memories of a Bath Attendant about the Life and Murder of Amir Kabir".

"Nightmares and Memories of a Bath Attendant about the Life and Murder of Amir Kabir" was selected as the best play of the year in 2016 by Iran's Critic and Theatrical Writers Society of the Theater Forum.

The play, which is about the life story of Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, the reformist prime minister of Qajar king Nasser ad-Din Shah, was well received by critics and theater goers.

Rafiei is also the director of two movies, "The Fish Fall in Love" (2006) and "Mr. Yusef" (2011).

NEWS IN BRIEF

Tehran museum to review Clint Eastwood's "Bird"

TT ART desk **TEHRAN —** The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art will screen "Bird", a 1988 American biographical film directed by Clint Eastwood, on Wednesday.

The screenplay was written by Joel Oliansky. The film is a tribute to the life and music of jazz saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker. It is constructed as a montage of scenes from Parker's life, from his childhood in Kansas City, through his early death at the age of 34.

The program is part of the screening sessions of the cinematheque of the museum.

Shyamalan's "Split" rules inauguration weekend with $40.2m

NEW YORK (AP) — M. Night Shyamalan's psychological thriller "Split" blew away box-office expectations, earning $40.2 million in ticket sales over inauguration weekend, according to studio estimates Sunday.

Though many were focused on Friday's presidential inauguration and Saturday's nationwide women's marches, "Split" doubled forecasts to easily lead all films. The Universal Pictures release again brings together Shyamalan, director of "The Sixth Sense," with the low-budget horror experts of Blumhouse Productions.

The PG-13-rated "Split," starring James McAvoy as a man with split personalities, cost less than $10 million to make.

"This is an unusual weekend in our society and a lot of things have been going on that would otherwise divert our attention," said Nick Carpou, head of distribution for Universal. "A film like this based on the elements that it brings and the audience that it attracts, I think can take some advantage of that either as a relief to current events or perhaps as an adjunct to them."

It's the second collaboration between producer Jason Blum and Shyamalan, whose fluctuating career has recently found a lucrative home at Blumhouse. They previously combined for 2015's breakout horror hit "The Visit."

The Vin Diesel action sequel "xXx: The Return of Xander Cage" opened in second place, with $20 million. It's the third film in the trilogy and first installment in 12 years. Though a modest start for a film designed to recharge a dormant franchise, it is faring better overseas. It took in $50.5 million internationally over the weekend.

Last weekend's top film, the stirring mathematician drama "Hidden Figures," held on well, sliding to third place with an estimated $16.3 million.

Despite the weekend's political events, the North American box office was up 29.2 percent from the same weekend last year, according to comScore.

"You would think that those events would suck the air out of the room, but that didn't happen," said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for comScore. "The movie theater experience with the right content is irresistible no matter what is going on in the outside world, and in fact may even benefit from so much going on in the outside world. To have your wits scared out you is one of the greatest escapes."

Fajr festival poster featuring legendary filmmaker Ali Hatami's portrait unveiled

TT ART desk **TEHRAN —** The 35th Fajr Film Festival unveiled its official poster featuring the portrait of legendary filmmaker Ali Hatami (1944-1996), mostly famous for his particular attention to old Tehran and its culture.

The unveiling was held during a special ceremony at the Film Museum of Iran in Tehran on Sunday evening.

The ceremony was attended by Hatami's widow, Zahra Khoshkam, only daughter, Leila, and her husband, Ali Mosaffa, and the two grandchildren.

Majid Barzegar is the designer of the official poster for the 35th edition of the Fajr Film Festival.

Great cinematic figures including actor Mohammad-Ali Keshavraz who had appeared in several films and TV series by Hatami as well as filmmakers Khosro Sinai and Puran Derakhshandeh attended the ceremony.

The participants were asked to observe a moment's silence for the victims who lost their lives in the collapse of the Plasco Building in Tehran after a fierce fire broke out in the 17-storey commercial center on Thursday.

A short film made by Aziz Sa'ati about Hatami was next screened for the audience and producer Mohammad-Mehdi Daadgu said that there are plans to prepare a package of all the works by Hatami including his interviews as well.

Next Hatmai's family members and Keshavarz appeared on stage to unveil the poster. Keshavarz recalled the old days when he used to have roles in Hatami's films and said, "I am always indebted to Hatami. Hatami began work with theater. When he began his early works we used to work together. He next entered the world of cinema and turned into the icon of Iran's cinema."

Addressing the audience, he said, "If you want to succeed in cinema you must begin with theater."

The package containing films, which have won the Audience Choice awards over the past editions of Fajr festival, was next unveiled and several filmmakers and producers whose productions have won the awards were honored on stage.

Right to left, actress Leila Hatami, actor Davud Rashidi's widow, Ehteram Borumand, filmmaker Ali Hatami's widow, Zahra Khoshkam, Ali Hatami's grandchildren and Fajr Film Festival secretary Mohammad Heidari pose with the official poster of the festival at the Film Museum of Iran in Tehran on January 22, 2017. (Mehr/Masud Saki)

Ali Hatami was born in 1944 in Tehran and died in 1996. He was a filmmaker, screenwriter, art director and costume designer.

A graduate in cinema from the College of Dramatic Arts, his debut was "Hassan Kachal" (Hasan the Bald, 1969), the first Iranian musical film. Since then, he paid particular attention to unusual rhythmic dialogs and also the use of traditional settings and architecture in his films, stylistic details that became characteristic of his works.

Thespians with Down syndrome to perform at Fajr festival

TT ART desk **TEHRAN —** A troupe of 15 thespians with Down syndrome is schedules to perform three plays during the 35th Fajr International Theater Festival.

"This is first troupe of people with Down syndrome active in street theater in the world," director Rasul Haqshenas said in a press release on Monday.

The group will perform "The Legend of Nanny Fish" and "The White Umbrellas" at Mashayekhi Theater from January 27 to 29.

They will also take "The Legend of the Rainless Plain" to the stage in the courtyard of Tehran's City Theater Complex.

The plays have been composed based on Iranian folklore stories, said Haqshenas who has been practicing theater therapy with people with Down syndrome for many years.

"By performing the street theater, we want to show the audience how much the people with Down syndrome are able to concentrate on a performance amid the hustle and bustle of the environment," he mentioned.

"In addition, acting in a street play helps them raise their self-confidence," he added.

"The subject of training is my main concern in theater therapy," Haqshenas said.

He noted that few people have expertise in theater therapy in Iran and stressed his readiness to organize workshops on the matter across the country.

Over 20 groups from around the world are currently participating in the Fajr theater festival, which will run until January 31.

A poster for "The White Umbrellas"

PICTURE OF THE DAY IRNA/*Amir-Hossein Bandi*

1. Visitors joke with an artwork on display during the 9th Fajr International Festival of Visual Arts at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art on January 22, 2017.

Jurgen Todenhofer travelogue of Middle East published in Persian

TT CULTURE desk **TEHRAN —** German writer Jurgen Todenhofer's travelogue of some of the countries in the Middle East "Thou Shalt Not Kill: My Dream of Peace" has recently been published in Persian by Kuleh Poshty Publications in Tehran.

Translated by Hossein Tehrani, the book is a detailed description of Todenhofer's journeys to Iran and Egypt and the war zones in Libya, Syria and Afghanistan from 2008 to 2013.

The book provides important insights into both the political situation as well as everyday life of the people in the areas.

Born in 1940, Todenhofer experienced the horrors of war and is considered to be a peace activist.

London Critics' Circle Film awards winners

LONDON (Hollywood Reporter) — The U.K.'s leading and longest-standing film critics group handed out its awards in London on Sunday night, with Isabelle Huppert getting the best actress of the year award and a special honor.

Outside of costume design, Whit Stillman's comedy "Love & Friendship" has not been considered to be among Academy Awards hopefuls, but it won a couple of the London Critics' Circle Film Awards on Sunday. But the final winner of the night was "La La Land", which took home the top award for film of the year.

In the nominations, "Love & Friendship" and "Moonlight", which also won two honors on Sunday, had tied with seven each, closely followed by Maren Ade's German comedy Toni Erdmann with six. "La La Land", "Manchester by the Sea", which also earned two awards, and "American Honey" each earned five nominations.

The winners were be voted on by the 140 members of the film section of the Critics' Circle, the U.K.'s leading and longest-standing film critics group. The ceremony took place Sunday evening at London's May Fair Hotel.

Ken Loach's "I, Daniel Blake" was honored as the best British/Irish film of the year.

The top acting honors went to Casey Affleck for "Manchester by the Sea" and Isabelle Huppert won for "Things to Come". Kate Beckinsale "Love & Friendship" and Andrew Garfield "Hacksaw Ridge" were named the best British/Irish actress and actor of the year. Huppert also got the Dilys Powell Award for Excellence in Film.

Early in the night, Kenneth Lonergan won the best screenwriter honor for "Manchester by the Sea", while Naomie Harris got the best supporting actress award, and Mahershala Ali "Moonlight" and Tom Bennett "Love & Friendship" tied in the best supporting actor race.