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Less than a month to Persian Gulf Star Refinery's 2nd phase inauguration

By Ebrahim Fallahi
 Bandar Abbas – The managing director of National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (NIOPDC) said the second phase of Persian Gulf Star Refinery (PGSR), which is hailed as the Middle East's largest gas condensate processing complex, is due to be inaugurated officially in less than a month.
 Speaking in a press conference in

the city of Bandar Abbas in southern Hormozgan Province, Alireza Sadeqabadi said the mechanical completion of the mega-refinery's second development phase was finished in late Iranian calendar year of 1396 (ended on March 20) and it will be officially inaugurated by President Rouhani before Ramadan which would be less than a month. **→4**

Top officials meet in Majlis

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Top officials from the three branches of government met on Sunday in Majlis (parliament), where they held talks to boost the level of engagement among the government branches and tackle national issues in different areas.
 During the meeting, President Hassan Rouhani, Parliament Speaker Ali Larjani

and Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Sadeq Amoli Larjani addressed the parliament as heads of the three branches of government, ISNA reported.
 Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri, Deputy Parliament Speaker Masoud Pezeshkian, and Judiciary Vice Chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i, as well as representatives from the three main parliamentary factions also addressed the trilateral meeting.

Saudi Arabia: A new coup or a chaos for small drone

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — The House of Saud regime that has experienced different coups in recent years Saturday night witnessed another shocking event.
 Heavy gunfire and explosions has been reported from outside the royal palace in Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh. According to eyewitnesses gunfire could be heard in the vicinity of the palace late on Saturday night.
 The Saudi regime's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has reportedly been

evacuated from the compound to a bunker at an air force base in Riyadh.
 The number of assailants, their identity or affiliation has still not been identified.
 Some sources claim that the attack is part of a coup led by Saudi royals who are opposed to King Salman, while other reports indicate that the shooting occurred when the palace guards targeted a small drone which came too close to Salman's residence. **→13**

EDITORIAL
By Mohammad Ghaderi
 Tehran Times editor-in-chief
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Conflicts intensified between Russia and West

Relations between Russia and NATO are now at the worst condition after the Cold War. "Mikhail Gorbachev", the last Soviet President, had warned about the re-start of Cold War between the White House and the Kremlin before. But now Russian officials believe that the constant and extensive conflicts between Moscow and the West leads them to much more complicated conditions than that of the Cold War time. Meanwhile, the case of "Sergei Skripal" has only a catalytic role that adds to the speed and intensity of opposition between Russia and NATO. In other words, the "Skripal" case can't be considered as a start to the conflicts raised between Russia and the West, but it's rather the climax of such an opposition.
 As reported, Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, were discovered on a bench in Salisbury in early March, with the UK claiming a Soviet-designed nerve agent was used against them. Without a proper investigation being carried out, London said it was "highly likely" that Russia was responsible for the attack and introduced sanctions against the country, including the expulsion of Russian diplomats.

Moscow has denied all accusations, decrying them as a "provocation," and demanded proof from the British side. However, London refused to cooperate with Russia on the case, denying its consular staff access to Russian citizen Yulia Skripal and turning down the request to provide a sample of the toxic substance in question. The United States, the EU and NATO have also supported this claim in opposition to Moscow. However, Kremlin officials denied such an allegation, calling it a plot by the British to put diplomatic and psychological pressure on Moscow.
 As predicted, with the intensification of the opposition between Russia and the West over the Skripal case, the conflict immediately entered the "diplomatic phase". Along with Britain, countries such as the United States, Canada, Poland, Germany, and ... expelled the Russian diplomats from their countries. In response, Russia has also expelled many of Western diplomats. The expulsion of 23 British diplomats and 60 US diplomats from Moscow, and the closure of the US Consulate General in St. Petersburg, was among the measures taken by Kremlin in this regard. **→7**

U.S. seductions are dangerous balderdash

By Martin Love
 An American journo can't be unaware of protests in Iran against some aspects of the status quo. However much this may be falsely and crudely amplified in broadcasts via the usual channels such as Twitter by unhappy Iranians outside Iran I don't know, but it is hard to not see some commentary and even videos of this. Such tells me a lot that is positive about Iranians generally: that Iranians are not afraid to speak their minds against whatever they object to, that inside Iran there is lively debate about a host of issues despite whatever countermeasures may be taken by the Iranian "establishment", and that Iranians are more aware about what's happening than,

for example, Americans seem to be now. Yes, I recall my youth in the 60s and early 70s of the last century when the US was awash with protests against the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights struggle against racism was rampant, and at least at the time, more or less effective. I also know that Iran, since the revolution in 1979, has not reached its full potential (which is huge) yet, and as a result there is at least economic distress in the country with a population that has grown enormously since 1979, but I attribute that largely to US -led sanctions against Iran and the reluctance of foreigners to invest in Iran's economy and growth potential

despite the vibrancy and smarts of Iranians. But here's my central problem with dissidents I read about in or outside of Iran. If they think allowing US or "Western" interests to gain ascendancy constitutes some sort of salvation or solution to current woes in Iran, they are badly mistaken. To the extent that the US is some sort of "empire" now held together by militarism, and creating chaos to maintain it, Iranians would be well advised not to presume the US government and its elites really give a damn about Iran, and the US, having descended into a kind of totalitarianism where real democracy is kaput, is itself headed in to serious trouble both domestically and overseas. **→7**

Israeli-Saudi alliance behind war crimes in Syria: ex-U.S. senate candidate

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – A former U.S. Senate candidate said the Israeli-Saudi alliance has its "fingerprints all over illegal and criminal activities" in Syria.
 "...It is chiefly this alliance (the U.S., Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) against Assad, Iran, and Putin's Russia, that has resulted in at least 500,000 deaths and the displacement of millions of Syrians with the meter still running. It is this alliance which has been using the American and Zionist media to falsely demonize Assad, Iran, and Russia, making false accusations about Assad and the employment of chemical weapons on his part, even while ignoring the support of the United States for the provable genocidal war crimes of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, the recent murder by Israel of over a thousand unarmed demonstrators in Gaza, and the regular employment by both the

United States and Israel in recent years of white phosphorus and depleted uranium munitions in several regional conflicts." Mark Dankof, who is also a broadcaster and pastor in San Antonio, Texas, told the Tasnim news agency.
 He added, "...the Israeli-Saudi alliance has its fingerprints all over these illegal and criminal activities in Syria."
 Mark Dankof is a broadcaster for The Ugly Truth Podcast. Born in Wiesbaden, Germany, the son of a United States Air Force Colonel, he graduated from Valparaiso University in 1977 and from Chicago's Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1983. In recent years, he has pursued post-graduate work in systematic theology and the theological German at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Formerly the 36th District Chairman of the Republican Party in King County/Seattle

and later an elected delegate to Texas State Republican Conventions in 1994 and 1996, he entered the United States Senate race in Delaware in 2000 as the nominated candidate of the Constitution Party against Democratic candidate Thomas Carper and Republican incumbent William Roth.
 Following is the full text of the interview:
■ Multiple places in Syria came under attack by U.S., British and French military forces after President Donald Trump ordered a military strike against the war-torn country early on Saturday. What is your take on the attack?
A: My take on the attack is that we may all fairly conclude that Mr. Trump's foreign policy has been irretrievably hijacked by the worst elements in the Neo-Conservative, Israel First fifth column in the American government and media. **→7**

ARTICLE
By Maryam Qarehgozlou
 Head of the Tehran Times
 Social Desk

Things are changing: "Wet gets wetter, dry gets drier"

This is not new, our country is situated in an arid and semi-arid area, and we all know what it means: Iran is not normally defined as a wet country.
 And unfortunately despite what some people in the other part of the world might call "hoax", climate change is actually plaguing us here in Iran.
 According to NASA's official website, the planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.1 degrees Celsius since the late 19th century. The change is driven largely by increased carbon dioxide and other human-made emissions into the atmosphere. Most of the warming occurred in the past 35 years, with 16 of the 17 warmest years on record occurring since 2001.
 In addition to what is happening in other parts of the world including warming oceans, sea level rise, glacial retreat, shrinking ice sheets, declining arctic sea ice, ocean acidification, etc., climate change is seriously affecting global precipitation patterns.
 In an article titled "climate change is altering rainfall patterns worldwide" published in Scientific American it is stated that a study, published in the journal "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences", has found that climate change is moving global precipitation patterns in new directions.
 It continues that climate models predict that the addition of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere will shift precipitation in two main ways. The first shift is in a strengthening of existing precipitation patterns. **→12**



Actor Farhad Aslani attends Fajr intl. filmfest

Iranian actor Farhad Aslani (C) poses with fans for a selfie during the 36th Fajr International Festival at Tehran Charsu Cineplex on April 21, 2018. The festival will come to end by honoring winners on April 26.

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MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



Leader hails Army chief's unifying comments

POLITICS TEHRAN — Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Sunday lauded Army Chief Abdolrahim Mousavi for his “unifying comments”, saying the remarks showed his “managerial wisdom” and “spiritual purity”.

On Saturday, General Mousavi said the enemies have repeatedly failed to harm Iran through creating division between the IRGC and the Army. He said all branches of the Iranian military are united against enemies’ plots to cause rift among them.

During a meeting with commanders of the Army Ground Forces, Ayatollah Khamenei said the comments make the Army more and more respectable in the Iranian people’s eyes.



Velayati: Iran ready to help Afghanistan in higher education

POLITICS TEHRAN — Ali Akbar Velayati, the head of Azad University’s board of founders, said on Sunday that Iran is ready to share its experiences in higher education with Afghanistan.

Velayati made the remarks after a meeting with Afghan Minister of Higher Education Najibullah Khwaja Omari in Tehran, Mehr reported.

He said his talks with the Afghan minister on cooperation between the Islamic Azad University and Afghanistan’s higher education institutions were constructive.

He also voiced Iran’s readiness to offer scholarship to talented Afghan students.



‘Iran-Iraq ties unaffected by mischievous meddling’

POLITICS TEHRAN — The defense minister says Iran’s relations with Iraq are so deep and strong that they will not be affected by “mischievous interventions” by other parties.

Brigadier General Amir Hatami made the remarks at the end of a two-day visit to Iraq on Saturday, which took place at Baghdad’s invitation. He said the bilateral ties enjoys a certain and special degree of strength, Press TV reported.

Hatami said the goal of his visit was to expand mutual interaction and enhance military and security cooperation.

He also said the U.S. is unhappy with the two neighbors’ close relationship.



Shamkhani to attend Sochi security conference

POLITICS TEHRAN — Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), is slated to make a visit to Russia’s Sochi to deliver a speech at the 9th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues.

The conference is scheduled to be held with the attendance of senior security officials from five continents on April 25-26, IRNA reported.

Shamkhani is expected to outline the security conditions as well as political and economic development in the region and Iran’s strategy and experience with regard to terrorism and security threats, director of SNSC media office Alireza Zarifian said on Sunday.



Ex-Tehran prosecutor arrested

POLITICS TEHRAN — Police have reportedly arrested Tehran’s former prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi, who was earlier convicted to two years imprisonment for the post-2009 election deaths in prison.

According to IRNA, Mortazavi was arrested in northern Mazandaran Province on Sunday and was taken to the Evin detention center in Tehran.

In March 2018, Mortazavi’s sentence was referred to the department for the enforcement of judgments, but he failed to show up, sparking rumors that he had fled abroad.



Experts overhaul C-130 transportation plane

POLITICS TEHRAN — A C-130 transportation plane has been overhauled by Iranian technicians at Shiraz Shahid Doran airbase, the commander of the airbase said on Sunday.

“The plane which had been out of service for years was overhauled by the skilled experts of Shahid Doran airbase,” Fars quoted Brigadier General Mansour Mohammadi as saying. Mohammadi added that the overhaul operations on the plane were conducted using the existing equipment and fully indigenized possibilities.

In recent years, the Iranian Air Force has shown remarkable capabilities in building parts and equipment and overhauling different types of planes and helicopters.

Zarif: Iran open to prisoner swap if U.S. changes ‘attitude’



In an interview with CBS’s Face the Nation moderator Margaret Brennan aired on Sunday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said American “demands” to release of U.S. citizens held in Tehran without changing attitude are hampering “genuine dialogue.”

“The United States needs to approach this from a position of dealing with another sovereign government,” said Zarif. “And if that approach led to change, then the United States would see a difference.”

Five Americans are known to have been detained by Iranian authorities, including the arrest of Baquer Namazi, who is reportedly ill. Some argue the detention of American-Iranian dual nationals is little more than an attempt by the far right to create leverage.

Asked about the conditions of the imprisoned Americans, Zarif insisted that their health requirements were being “taken care of.”

“Our judiciary is an independent organ,” Zarif told Brennan.

“Just what you would say about your courts, and we cannot have an impact on the decisions of our judiciary. But we have been trying to use our influence from a humanitarian perspective. First of all, in order to make sure their health requirements are taken care of as well as to see whether a humanitarian agreement can be reached.”

Some family members of the detained have pleaded the Trump administration to engage the Iranian government directly in securing their release. In 2016, Iran released four Americans in a swap for seven Iranians held in the United States. At the time, many Republicans condemned the exchange negotiated by the Obama administration.

After a fiery speech by President Trump at the United Nations, where he called Iran a “murderous regime” that needed to free Americans “unjustly detained,” the Iranians declined an offered conversation between the president and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

“You do not engage in negotiations by exercising disrespect for a country, for its people, for its government, by openly making claims including this illusion about regime change. Then you do not leave much room

“We have put a number of options for ourselves, and those options are ready, including options that would involve resuming at a much greater speed our nuclear activities,” Zarif states.

for a genuine dialogue,” said Zarif.

Pressed by Brennan on whether the Iranians were open to an exchange, like the Obama-era swap, Zarif offered an opening.

“It is a possibility, certainly from a humanitarian perspective, but it requires a change in attitude,” said Zarif.

■ Zarif says has to “wait and see” if he can work with Pompeo

Elsewhere in the interview, Zarif said Mike Pompeo’s nomination and possible confirmation to be the next U.S. Secretary of State is an indication to the international community that the U.S. is “not serious” about international obligations, including

holding up the Iran nuclear deal.

Asked if he would be able to work with the new secretary if Pompeo is confirmed, Zarif said he would have to “wait and see.”

“The requirement for any international engagement is mutual respect,” Zarif said. He added, “The indications that we have seen up until now -- not been very encouraging. We will have to wait to make a judgment on the new secretary of state.”

Zarif said Pompeo’s Capitol Hill testimony that Iran was not “racing towards a bomb” was a “late admission but better than never.”

“They put sanctions on Iran at that time because we were not racing for a bomb and

now they want to reimpose sanctions on Iran because we are not racing for a bomb, it’s interesting,” Zarif added.

While Pompeo wouldn’t explicitly say whether he will advocate to stay in -- or pull out of -- the Iran deal during lawmakers’ questioning, he said that bolstering the nuclear pact would be a priority if he’s confirmed, adding that fixing the deal is in the country’s best interest. He noted that if the deal could not be fixed and the president continues to withdraw, he’d advocate for a tougher one.

As for the future of the deal as Mr. Trump’s new national security adviser John Bolton aims for possible regime change in Iran, Zarif said the U.S. “never abandoned the idea of regime change in Iran” and instead are just “more explicit about stating it.”

Zarif said Iran is “ready” to restart its nuclear program if the Trump administration leaves the 2015 nuclear agreement and reinstates sanctions.

“We have put a number of options for ourselves, and those options are ready, including options that would involve resuming at a much greater speed our nuclear activities,” Zarif said.

When CBS News interviewed Zarif in October, he said “nobody will trust” the U.S. to engage in any long-term negotiations if the Iran deal blows up. That includes North Korea, he said at the time -- relevant now perhaps more than ever, as the U.S. looks to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the months ahead.

“This is not a bilateral treaty between Iran and the U.S.,” Zarif said at the time. “So whatever domestic politicking he wants to do, that’s his business. You know, the United States is a permanent member of the Security Council. And if it’s not going to uphold a resolution, that not only it voted for but it sponsored, then the credibility of the institution that the United States considers to be very important would be at stake.”

“Nobody else will trust any U.S. administration to engage in any long-term negotiation because the length of any commitment, the duration of any commitment from now on with any U.S. administration would be the remainder of the term of that president,” Zarif had said.

Zarif said Pompeo’s Capitol Hill testimony that Iran was not “racing towards a bomb” was a “late admission but better than never.”

Iran denounces terrorist attack on Kabul as ‘inhuman’

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi issued a statement on Sunday condemning a suicide terrorist attack in the Afghan capital Kabul, calling it a “criminal” and “inhuman” act.

Offering condolences to the Afghan government, people and families of the victims, Qassemi expressed hope that terrorism would be eradicated through collective international efforts.

The suicide blast at a voter registration center in Kabul left at least 52 people killed and dozens injured.

Reportedly, the attack had been carried out by an individual wearing an explosive-laden vest.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack.

Gen Daud Amin, the Kabul police chief, said the suicide bomber targeted civilians who had gathered to receive national identification cards, the



Guardian reported.

The parliamentary and district council elections are scheduled to be held on October 20.

Last week, a voter registration center was attacked in Ghor province, according to Tolonews, a local news website.

On Thursday, unidentified gunmen killed two policemen guarding a voter registration center in Jalalabad City, Aljazeera reported.

Tehran calls U.S. human rights report ‘biased’

POLITICS TEHRAN — Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi rejected on Saturday the U.S. State Department report about human rights situation in Iran as “biased” and “politically motivated”.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the U.S. State Department’s annual report, especially claims about the human rights situation in Iran, as biased and politically motivated which portrays an unrealistic and distorted image of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Qassemi stated.

Acting U.S. Secretary of State John Sullivan released the 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices on Friday in which it was claimed that Iran violates the human rights.

Qassemi said the accusations made against Iran are “unfounded” and “unacceptable”.

He said, “Based on credible international reports, the U.S. government is known as the biggest violator of the human rights in the



world and plays an important role in supporting countries which violate the human rights such as the Zionist regime of Israel and certain reactionary countries in the region.”

He added, “It is better for the U.S. government to immediately take necessary actions to support human rights inside the U.S. and respond to violation of human rights by its allies instead of interfering in other countries’ domestic affairs and judging situation of the human rights in the world.”

Iranian diplomat says unilateral U.S.-led attacks on Syria are worrisome

Iran’s Ambassador to London Hamid Baedinejad has said that the U.S.-led attacks on Syria are worrisome and go against the UN Charter.

“The response by President Trump and his allies to the alleged use of chemical weapons by Syria shows there is a willingness by some countries to resort to unilateral policies to enforce disarmament obligations despite there being an internationally verifiable treaty in place. This is quite worrisome,” he wrote in an article published by online newspaper The Independent on Saturday.

The U.S., UK and France fired about 100 missiles at Syria on

April 14. The attack took place one week after a suspected chemical weapons attack in the Syrian town of Douma near Damascus. The attackers claimed the Syrian government was responsible for the attack. However, the government rejected the claim.

Following is an excerpt of Baedinejad’s article:

It remains unclear why the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is legally and internationally empowered to enforce verification of such weapons’ use, was not fully employed in relation to the alleged chemical attack in Douma. It is also unclear why the US and its allies could not postpone their action until the

inspectors, who were already on their own way, could reach Douma and start their inspection activity.

As a party to the convention, Syria says it is committed to allowing the inspection team to fully investigate the allegations of chemical weapons having been used. Syria had already fulfilled its undertakings to destroy stockpiles of such weaponry, with the OPCW reporting the destruction as complete. There is no obvious impediment to the OPCW conducting a comprehensive inspection to verify the alleged use -- and accordingly production and stockpiling -- of chemical weapons in Douma. ➔13

Rouhani vows to protect access right to social media

POLITICS TEHRAN — President Hassan Rouhani has said that his government will protect the Iranian peoples’ right to use social media.

“Breaking monopolies and backing the domestic messaging apps do not mean imposing restrictions on other social media platforms. People preserve the right to choose and they can simultaneously use various social media platforms,” Rouhani wrote in a message on his Instagram page on Sunday.

A recent decision by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to shut down his Telegram channel fuelled speculation about imposing an imminent ban on the popular messaging app, which authorities say takes over 40 percent of Iran’s internet bandwidth. The office of the Supreme Leader cited ending Telegram’s monopoly and

supporting domestic messaging apps as main reasons behind the decision.

In the meantime, First Vice-President Es’haq Jahangiri announced that he was quitting Telegram followed by a directive sent to all government departments telling them to stop using the app. Supporters of Telegram estimate that about 40 million Iranians, almost half of the country’s population, use it, claiming that the app has become a source of income for hundreds of citizens across the country.

The Supreme Council of Cyberspace has earlier set five conditions for foreign messengers to operate in Iran. Storing and processing Iranian users’ data inside the country, complying with the rules and regulations related to the protection of users’ privacy as well as responding to queries from judicial authorities are among the stated conditions.

Zarif refutes a ‘one-sided’ implementation of JCPOA

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Saturday that Iran will “vigorously” resume its nuclear activities if the U.S. quits the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

“America never should have feared Iran producing a nuclear bomb, but we will pursue vigorously our nuclear enrichment,” Press TV quoted him as telling reporters in New York.

In a statement on January 12, U.S. President Donald Trump gave Europeans only 120 days to agree to an overhaul of the nuclear agreement and said if the text of the nuclear deal is not revised he would unilaterally withdraw the U.S. from it. The deadline falls on May 12.

Elsewhere, Zarif urged European leaders to press Trump to abide by the JCPOA.

“To try to appease the president, I think, would be an exercise in futility,” he said.

He also noted, “It is important for Iran to receive the benefits of the agreement and there is no way that Iran would do a one-sided implementation of the agreement.”

Iran, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - the U.S., UK, France, Russia, and China - Germany and the European Union struck the nuclear deal in July 14, 2015. The deal took effect in January 2016.

Under the deal, Iran is obliged to lower its nuclear activities in exchange for termination of economic and financial sanctions.

U.S. supplies weapons to Kurdish militants free of charge: Erdogan

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says the United States and its allies have been providing free weapons to Kurdish militants operating in northern Syria in a move that poses a threat to Turkey's security.

In an interview with the Turkish NTV news channel on Saturday, Erdogan accused the U.S. and its allies of refusing to sell weapons to Ankara while arming the outlawed Kurdish forces.

"We cannot buy weapons from the U.S. with our money, but unfortunately, the U.S. and coalition forces give these weapons, this ammunition, to terrorist organizations for free," he said. "So where does the threat come from? It comes primarily from strategic partners."

The Turkish president also noted that Washington continues to dispatch arms convoys to Syria. "The U.S. sent 5,000 trucks loaded with weapons to northern Syria," he said.

The U.S. views the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/Yekineyên Parastina Gel) as an ally in Syria. The militant group forms the backbone of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which is being trained, equipped and protected by the Americans.

Last December, the U.S. President Donald Trump approved providing weapons worth \$393 million to what Washington calls partners in Syria, including the YPG.

The following month, the U.S. announced plans to create a 30,000-strong force comprised of Kurdish militants, which would be deployed along the Turkish border.

The U.S. measures infuriated Ankara, which views the YPG as the Syrian branch of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK/Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê).

Erdogan accused Washington of planning to form a "terror



army" in Syria. On January 20, Turkey launched an operation against the YPG in the Syrian city of Afrin.

Afrin fell to Turkish forces in March, with Erdogan warning that the military campaign may be extended along the whole Syrian border.

The Afrin operation, codenamed Operation Olive Branch, has strained relations between the U.S. and Turkey. Ankara has threatened to advance on the SDF-held town of Manbij, where U.S. troops are stationed.

About 2,000 U.S. troops are deployed in northeast Syria in territories under the control of Kurdish militants.

Turkey has been sounding the alarm about Washington's alliance with Kurdish fighters in Syria. The country, which has the second-biggest army in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), has been coordinating with Russia and Iran to ensure a political transition, leaving Washington out of the negotiations.

(Source: agencies)

Saudi regime raises number of beheadings by 70%

The number of beheadings in the House of Saud regime during the first quarter of 2018 rose by over 70 percent in comparison with the corresponding period last year, a new report by a nonprofit organization says.

In its latest report published Saturday, the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) said executions by the Saudi regime in the first quarter of 2018 increased by 72 percent.

The report also showed that a number of foreign nationals also face capital punishment in Saudi Arabia.

ESOHR released its report amid widespread criticism of the Saudi regime over its terrible human rights record, including the censorship of free speech, indiscriminate incarceration of citizens with no due process, and lack of basic freedoms for women and girls.

The Saudi regime refrains from providing any official statistics for people on death row but the organization confirmed that 42 people are expected to be imminently executed, including 8 individuals who were minors at the time of the offense.

The anti-death penalty rights group Reprieve said in March that the Saudi regime's execution rate has increased since Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) was appointed crown prince in 2017. The group said 133 executions have taken

place in the eight months since his appointment last June, compared with 67 in the eight months before.

Maya Foa, the group's director, said, "The doubling of executions under the new crown prince reveals that, beneath his glossy public image, Mohammed bin Salman is one of the most brutal leaders in the kingdom's recent history."

In its report, ESOHR denounced the Saudi regime's execution of people for alleged offenses that are not even against the international law and said the convicts have simply attended peaceful demonstrations, exercised freedom of speech or practiced their religious rites.

Riyadh has been rejecting all requests for visits by special independent rapporteurs of the United Nations since 2008, the report added.

Concern is growing about the increasing number of executions in Saudi Arabia. Saudi regime authorities say the executions reveal the Saudi regime's commitment to "maintaining security and realizing justice." The country has come under particular criticism from rights groups for the executions carried out for non-fatal crimes.

According to the London-based rights group Amnesty International, the Saudi regime has one of the highest execution rates in the world. The New York-based Human Rights

Watch (HRW) has called on the Saudi regime to abolish its "ghastly" beheadings.

In the most stunning case of executions in 2016, the Saudi regime executed on January 2 Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr along 46 other people in defiance of international calls for the release of the prominent Shia cleric and other jailed political dissidents in the regime.

In July 2017, human rights group Amnesty International called on the Saudi regime to halt the executions of 14 individuals who were sentenced to death following a "grossly unfair mass trial" as part of the Saudi regime's "bloody execution spree."

"By confirming these sentences Saudi Arabia's authorities have displayed their ruthless commitment to the use of the death penalty as a weapon to crush dissent and neutralize political opponents," said Amnesty's director of campaigns for the Middle-East, Samah Hadid.

The 14 individuals were convicted over charges of "armed rebellion against the ruler" by, among other things, "participating in shooting at security personnel, security vehicles," "preparing and using Molotov Cocktail bombs," "theft and armed robbery" and "inciting chaos, organizing and participating in riots."

(Source: Press TV)

Syrian fighter jets strike militant positions near capital: report

Syrian fighter jets have conducted precision strikes against positions held by foreign-backed militants near the capital Damascus, inflicting casualties on their ranks and damage on their hardware and equipment, Syrian state media reports.

Syria's official SANA news agency on Sunday, citing military sources, said that the airstrikes pounded militants' dens and command and communication centers in Hajar al-Aswad district in the capital's periphery, adding that the counter-terror operation was supported by intensive artillery and rocket fire.

The report further said that the operation inflicted heavy losses upon the terrorists' ranks, destroying their fortified positions, hotbeds, and supply routes.

Terrorists' ammo caches were also destroyed while the army units were advancing from a number of directions and expanding control over the district's outskirts, the report said.

The Syrian army on April 14 declared the liberation of the town of Douma after the last pockets of militants from the so-called Jaish al-Islam (Jaysh al-Islam/Army of Islam/



Brigade of Islam) terrorist group and their families left their last bastion in the Eastern Ghouta countryside of Damascus.

The militants and their relatives were fully evacuated to the militant-held city of Jarabulus in northern Syria.

The Syrian army continues its push to secure Damascus and its surroundings after it liberated the entire Eastern Gh-

outa last week on the back of both military operations and evacuation deals with the militants there.

The country is also preparing to cleanse the southern districts of Damascus, including Yarmouk, of the Takfiri terrorists of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) and al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham).

On Saturday, Syrian jets also targeted ISIL positions in Hajar al-Aswad. An ISIL hideout and their ammunition depots were destroyed. The area is much smaller than Eastern Ghouta.

ISIL was defeated by the Syrian army and its allies late last year after three years of afflicting the country with unrelenting bloodshed and destruction.

The army, however, is on alert to get rid of pockets of ISIL remnants still active in the country.

■ **Mass grave found in Syrian city held by U.S.-backed militants**

Elsewhere, a mass grave containing around 50 bodies has been uncovered in the northern Syrian city of Raqqah which was held by the ISIL terrorist group and regarded as its so-called capital.

The graves located under a football pitch close to a hospital in the city contained bodies of both civilians and ISIL terrorists, AFP quoted Abdullah al-Eriane, a senior official with Raqqah Civil Council, as saying on Saturday.

He said up to 200 bodies could be dug up from the place upon further excavation.

(Source: Press TV)

2 killed in sectarian attack in southwestern Pakistan

Two people from the ethnic Hazara community were shot dead in a sectarian attack in southwestern Pakistan on Sunday, where targeted killings of minorities have continued despite improvements in overall security.

Three Hazara men were traveling together on the outskirts of Quetta, capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, when two men on a motorcycle opened fire on them, killing two and wounding the third, a police official said.

"It is a sectarian target killing," senior police officer Syed Attaullah Shah told Reuters.

No group has claimed responsibility for Sunday's attack.

At least six Hazaras were killed in targeted killings in the past two 7845 months in Quetta, the official added.

Hazaras are a mainly Shia Muslim community, and are frequently targeted by Taliban, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh), and other terrorist groups for their religious beliefs in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Many Hazaras fled to Pakistan during decades of conflict in neighboring Afghanistan, and nearly half a million now live in and around Quetta.

In 2013, three separate bombings killed more than 200

people in Hazara neighborhoods, raising international awareness of the plight of the community.

The violence in Baluchistan has fueled concern about security for projects in the \$57-billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor, a transport and energy link planned to run from western China to Pakistan's southern deep-water port of Gwadar.

In December two suicide bombers stormed a packed church in Quetta, killing at least 10 people and wounding up to 56. The attack was claimed by ISIL.

(Source: Reuters)

Nude gunman kills 3 at Tennessee restaurant: police

A nude gunman shot dead three people and injured at least four more in the early hours of Sunday at a restaurant on the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee, police said.

The Metropolitan Nashville Police Department said in a statement that the shooting occurred at a Waffle House restaurant in Antioch, a suburb southeast of Nashville, at 3:25 am (0825 GMT).

"A patron wrestled away the gunman's rifle. He was nude & fled on foot. He is a white man with short hair," the statement added.

A following statement named 29-year-old

Travis Reinking, of Morton, Illinois -- a village located some 450 miles north of Antioch -- as a person of interest. Police said the suspect arrived in a car registered to Reinking.

They added the gunman, who had shed his coat, was last seen walking on Murfreesboro Pike, where the 24-hour diner is located.

Local media citing police on the scene reported the gunman was armed with an AR-15 assault rifle -- a weapon commonly used by mass shooters in the United States, where debate over gun control is fierce and shootings are all-too-frequent.

Reports added at least one victim was taken to Vanderbilt University Medical Center, located in Nashville itself.

AR-15 rifles were used to kill 58 people in Las Vegas last October, while Florida school shooter Nikolas Cruz in February opened fire on his former high school with an AR-15 style rifle, killing 17 students and staff members.

In the wake of the Florida massacre, student survivors launched a gun control campaign -- drawing hundreds of thousands to demonstrations -- and businesses including Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods took

measures to restrict access to assault weapons and firearms in general.

However, Congress is sitting on its hands when it comes to the issue.

Meanwhile, an ABC News/Washington Post poll published on Friday suggested that support for a ban on assault weapons has risen sharply in the past few months.

Sixty-two percent of those polled said they support a nationwide ban on the sale of assault weapons, up from 50 percent in mid-February and 45 percent in late 2015.

(Source: AFP)

Hezbollah defending southern Lebanon against Israeli aggression: Nasrallah



The secretary general of the Lebanese resistance movement of Hezbollah says Hezbollah fighters have defended the southern sector of Lebanon against Israel's acts of aggression.

Addressing an election campaign ceremony via a televised speech broadcast live from the southern Lebanese city of Tyre on Saturday evening, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah described the city, located about 80 kilometers south of the capital Beirut, as one of the basic strongholds of the anti-Israel resistance front.

He added that the Israeli military launched the 1996 aggression against Lebanon by striking the military command of Hezbollah. "The Zionist air raid at the time failed to target late Hezbollah military commander Mustafa Badreddine," Nasrallah pointed out.

The Hezbollah chief further noted that Israel's aggressive policies towards Lebanon started just a year after its creation in the occupied Palestinian territories in 1948, dismissing allegations that Tel Aviv's hostilities began after the formation of Palestinian resistance movements.

"In 1960s, [prominent Shia cleric] Imam Musa al-Sadr used to ask the Lebanese government to defend southern cities and towns against Israeli aggressions. His pleas, however, went unanswered as authorities did not take any actions," Nasrallah underlined.

He added, "Because of the government's apathy, Imam Musa al-Sadr established a popular resistance movement in southern Lebanon to confront the Zionist enemy."

Nasrallah went on to say that the Beirut government failed to support southern Lebanese cities following the withdrawal of Israeli military forces in 2000, hailing Hezbollah's capabilities in securing southern Lebanon against Israel's barbarism.

He also urged his supporters to vote for Hezbollah and Amal Movement candidates in Lebanon's parliamentary elections, which are slated for May 6.

He then called on the Future Movement party, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, to enumerate its achievements concerning Lebanon's economy.

The Hezbollah head emphasized that Lebanese public institutions were plagued with corruption, demanding that a vigorous campaign confront the menace.

"All national sectors in Lebanon suffer from sectarianism. Some Lebanese leaders have resorted to sectarianism as a way to attain their political goals irrespective of the country's national interests," Nasrallah concluded.

(Source: Press TV)

Kuala Lumpur police: Killing of al-Batsh an 'international issue'

Kuala Lumpur's chief of police says the killing of a Palestinian academic in the Malaysian capital is an "international issue" that is being investigated from all angles.

Malaysian authorities said an autopsy was carried out on Sunday morning on the body of Hamas member Fadi al-Batsh, a day after the drive-by shooting that Hamas and the victim's family blamed on Israel.

"We are investigating all angles. I have to investigate very carefully and deeply. This is an international issue," police chief Mazlan Lazim said. Gaza's ruling Hamas movement said al-Batsh was an important member of the organization, accusing Israel's Mossad spy agency of being behind the killing.

Calling him a "loyal" member, Hamas said al-Batsh was a "scientist of Palestine's youth scholars" who made "important contributions" and participated in international forums in the field of energy.

The group initially stopped short of blaming Israel, saying only that he had been "assassinated by the hand of treachery".

However, its top leader later accused the Mossad of killing him and threatened retaliation.

Ismail Haniyeh told The Associated Press on Saturday that based on previous assassinations "Mossad is not away from this disgraceful, terrible crime".

On Saturday, he visited the mourning tent the armed wing of Hamas opened outside the house of al-Batsh's family in Jabalya in the north of the Gaza Strip.

Speaking to Al Jazeera in Gaza, al-Batsh's father called on the Malaysian authorities to investigate the "assassination" with urgency. Asked if Israel was behind the attack, Israeli war Minister Avigdor Lieberman declined to respond directly, suggesting instead that the alleged assassination may have been the result of score-settling within Hamas.

Israeli officials rarely make statements on alleged spy agency activity.

■ **European suspects**

Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Malaysia's deputy prime minister, said the suspects were believed to be Europeans with links to a foreign intelligence agency, according to state news agency Bernama.

Al-Batsh was walking from his high-rise apartment to dawn prayers at a local mosque in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Gombak when he was shot by two gunmen riding a motorcycle, officials said.

At the crime scene, police markers indicated 14 bullets had been sprayed at the victim, some of them hitting a wall.

Al-Batsh leaves behind a wife and three young children. He had lived in Malaysia for the past 10 years.

In December 2016, Palestinian drone expert Mohamed al-Zawari, was shot dead in Tunisia, with Hamas accusing Israel of killing him. Israel is widely believed to have killed numerous Palestinian activists in the past, many of them overseas.

(Source: agencies)

STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	94494.3
IFX	1059.98

Sources: tse.ir, lfb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,210 rials
EUR	51,990 rials
GBP	59,650 rials
AED	11,490 rials

Source: mehrnews.com

COMMODITIES

WTI	68.40/b
Brent	74.06/b
OPEC Basket	70.96/b
Gold	\$1,336.70 /oz
Silver	\$17.14/oz
Platinum	\$930.85/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



Inflation rate stands at 8.1%: statistical center

ECONOMY TEHRAN — The Statistical Center of Iran announced that the inflation rate in the first Iranian calendar month Farvardin (March 21-April 20) stood at 8.1 percent.

The figure shows 0.1 percent fall from 8.2 percent rate of inflation in the preceding month, IRNA reported.

All sectors of the Iranian economy registered positive growth in 2017, during which 650,000 jobs were created and the country attained a single-digit inflation rate after a quarter of century.



Monthly car imports down 77% yr/yr

ECONOMY TEHRAN — The value of Iran's car imports during the first Iranian calendar month Farvardin (March 21-April 20) fell 77 percent compared to the same month of the past year, IRNA reported on Sunday citing the data released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

Iran imported 1,034 cars worth \$23.651 million in the first month of this calendar year, with 73 percent decrease in the number of imports compared to the first month of the previous year.

China's ZTE seeks resolution of U.S. export ban

China's ZTE is seeking a resolution to a U.S. ban on selling it parts and software that it has said threatens its survival.

ZTE "has learnt from its past experiences on export control compliance and attaches significant importance to the work on export control compliance," the mobile phone and telecoms company said in a statement to the Hong Kong stock exchange.

ZTE "is making active communications with relevant parties and seeking a solution to the U.S. export denial order," it added in the statement.

U.S. authorities last week banned American companies from sales to ZTE for seven years, saying the Chinese company had broken a settlement agreement with repeated false statements - a move that threatens to cut off ZTE's supply chain.

The action was sparked by ZTE's violation of an agreement that was reached after it was caught illegally shipping U.S. goods to Iran. ZTE said on Sunday it had set up a compliance management committee led by its chief executive officer.

It also said it had invested in export control compliance, provided compliance training to staff and cooperated with the work of independent compliance monitors, the company added. The U.S. Commerce Department has granted a request from ZTE to submit more evidence after the agency imposed the ban, a senior Commerce official said on Saturday.

(Source: Reuters)

Chinese central bank governor says economy strong, financial leverage under control

China's economic fundamentals are strong and the country has sufficient policy tools to guard against systemic risks, People's Bank of China Governor Yi Gang said on Saturday, according to Xinhua.

"In 2017, China's non-financial leverage ratio increased slightly, the corporate leverage ratio declined somewhat and leverage in the financial sector was brought under control," Yi said during annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Washington, according to Xinhua.

Beijing has prioritized containing financial risks, after years of debt-fueled growth put China's economy on what the IMF previously called a "dangerous and unsustainable" trend.

In statements carried on the PBOC website, Yi reiterated recently announced measures to open the financial sector, with measures to "be implemented either in the next few months or by the end of this year".

(Source: Reuters)

Less than a month to Persian Gulf Star Refinery's 2nd phase inauguration

PGSR's gasoline output

According to Sadeqabadi, who is also a deputy at the oil ministry, the refinery's capacity for production of Euro-5 quality gasoline which stood at 12 million liters per day (mlpd) in the first phase will reach 24 mlpd after launching the second phase and further to 36 mlpd when the third phases goes operational.

"This will effectively cut the country's gasoline imports and turn Iran into an exporter of the product," deputy oil minister said.

Since inauguration, along with Euro-5 quality production, PGSR also accounts for 11 mlpd of the country's total 32 mlpd of Euro-4 gasoline production capacity.

NIOPDC has put it on the agenda to reach an average daily production of 28 million liters per day for both Euro-5 and Euro-4 quality gasoline by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2019).

The country's total gasoline production capacity will increase to 100 million liters per day by the mentioned date.

Sadeqabadi further noted that during the current fiscal year, the country's gasoil production capacity is going to increase 28 million liters, of which eight million liters will be supplied from PGSR, when the refinery's second development phase goes on stream, and another four million liters will be added after the third phase is operational.

Financing of project

Asked by the Tehran Times about the mega-projects' financing resources, the deputy minister explained that no foreign fund has been used in this project and PGSR is fully financed by domestic and governmental sources.

"A €260-million fund has been recently approved by President Rouhani to be injected into the project, of which €120 million is going to be funded by National Development Fund of Iran (NDF) and the rest comes from the refinery's



Managing Director of National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company Alireza Sadeqabadi (3rd L) and Managing Director of Persian Gulf Star Oil Company Mohammad-Ali Dadvar (1st L) in a press conference at the place of Persian Gulf Star Refinery on Saturday

incomes," Sadeqabadi said.

"We have no problem regarding the project's financing," he added.

Impact of new U.S. sanctions

Elsewhere in his remarks, Sadeqabadi mentioned the potential effect of U.S. posing new sanctions on the country saying all the project's equipment and machinery has been already purchased and mostly installed, so in case of new sanctions there would be no impact on the project's progress.

"The project is due to be completed by the end of the

current Iranian calendar year and hopefully everything will go smoothly on schedule," he added.

Construction of the refinery started in 2006, but the project faced some hurdles due to financial constraints resulting from West-imposed sanctions on the country's oil industry.

Based in the southern province of Hormozgan, the mega-refinery is the first of its kind designed based on gas condensate feedstock.

PGSR is planned to have a total crude oil processing capacity of 360,000 barrels per day.

Capital Intelligence Corporate to establish office in Iran

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Capital Intelligence Corporate (CI Ratings) intends to establish its office in Iran, the portal of Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) quoted one of the corporate's senior directors as saying. Making the remarks during a conference, discussing the role of credit rating, held at the place of TCCIMA in Tehran on Saturday, Michael Page announced that the CI office will be founded by the end of the current year. Addressing the same event, the Deputy Head of Organization for Investment, Economic and Technical Assistance of Iran Jamal Hosseini underlined the significant role of the Iranian private sector for reaching



the planned 8-percent economic growth in future adding that "having access to interna-

tional financial markets requires valid ratings, therefore, Iran's investment organization has made several agreements with prominent international rating corporates to use their services for improving Iranian companies' validity and rates."

Capital Intelligence Ratings Ltd. has been providing credit analysis and ratings since 1982, and now rates over 300 Banks, Corporates and Financial Instruments (Bonds & Sukuk) in 39 countries. A specialist in emerging markets, CI Ratings geographical coverage includes the Middle East, the wider Mediterranean region, Central and Eastern Europe, South Asia, South-East Asia, the Far East, and North and South Africa.

Annual petchem exports exceed \$12b

ENERGY TEHRAN — Iran exported over 22.41 million tons of petrochemical products worth more than \$12 billion in the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20), IRIB news reported citing the data released by National Petrochemical Company (NPC).

Exports from Assalouyeh and Mahshahr petrochemical zones, both in southwest of the country, stood at 11.423 million tons worth \$5.977 billion and 6 million tons worth \$3.41 billion, respectively, during the past year. Iran's export of petrochemical products is anticipated to reach \$14 billion in the current Iranian calendar year, NPC Managing Director Seyed Reza Norouzzadeh said in early April.

The official also announced that through completing some petrochemical projects in this year, petrochemical production is



expected to hit 47 million tons, of which some 27 million tons will be exported, Shana news agency reported.

NPC managing director further said that 60 petrochemical projects with the nominal capacity of 65.4 million tons are currently underway throughout the country with \$42.8 billion of investment.

Iran is among the few countries which have all kinds of petrochemical feedstock.

ORG's studies on Caspian Sea oil, gas reserves promising: NIOC

ENERGY TEHRAN — Norway's ORG Company's result of studies on four blocks in the Caspian Sea is promising for extraction of oil and gas reserves, according to Gholamreza Manouchehri, the deputy for development and engineering at the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC).

ORG submitted the result of its studies related to Sardar Jangal and three other exploration blocks (24, 26 and 29) to the NIOC on Saturday.

ORG and NIOC signed a memorandum of understanding on November 1, 2017 on conducting studies on the blocks and the Norwegian company offered the results in less than the projected 6-month deadline to the Iranian company.

Addressing the meeting on submitting the study results, Manouchehri underlined ORG's experiences in deep-water drill-



ing and cooperation with international energy majors in various projects, adding this would pave the way for technology transfer to Iranian companies.

While extraction of oil and gas from the Caspian deposits requires high technology and huge investment as it needs deep-water drilling, it seems to create an opportunity for Iran to achieve such know-how.

SP phase 14 first platform to start operation in a month

ENERGY TEHRAN — The first platform of phase 14 of developing South Pars gas field (Iran shares with Qatar in the Persian Gulf) will start operation by the end of current Iranian calendar year (May 21), according to the operator of the phase.

Hamidreza Masoudi said the off-

shore part of phase 14 is projected to be completed by the end of current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2019), Public Relations Department of Pars Oil and Gas Company (POGC), which is in charge of developing the field, reported. Masoudi put the total progress of implementing phase 14 at 80 percent and said building

the platforms of this phase has a 91.5-percent progress at the moment, while the operation of laying the pipeline for transferring gas to the onshore installations has 90 percent progress.

He also put the phase progress in drilling at 80 percent and in refinery construction at 75.5 percent.



EU and Mexico agree new free trade pact

The European Union and Mexico reached an agreement on Saturday on a new free trade deal, a coup for both parties in the face of increased protectionism from the United States under President Donald Trump.

Since its plans for a trade alliance with the United States were frozen after Trump's election victory, the EU has focused instead on trying to champion open markets and seal accords with other like-minded countries.

The agreement in principle with Mexico follows a deal struck last year with Japan and comes ahead of talks next week with the Mercosur bloc of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

"With this agreement, Mexico joins Canada, Japan and Singapore in the growing list of partners willing to work with the EU in defending open, fair and rules-based trade," said European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

For Mexico, a deal with the EU is part of a strategy to reduce its reliance on the United States, the destination of 80 percent of its exports. That has become more urgent, given Trump's push to rewrite the North American Free

Trade Agreement.

The EU and Mexico wanted to update a trade deal agreed 21 years ago that largely covers industrial goods. The new deal adds farm products, more services, investment and government procurement, and include provisions on labour and environmental standards and fighting corruption.

The European Commission said that, under the deal struck on Saturday, practically all trade in goods with Mexico will be duty-free, including for farm products such as Mexican chicken and asparagus and European dairy produce.

The deal will for example cut Mexican tariffs of up to 20 percent on cheeses such as gorgonzola and increase EU pork exports, the Commission said.

It will also allow Mexican companies to bid for government contracts in Europe and EU companies for those in Mexico, including at state level.

Mexican Economy Minister Ildefonso Guajardo said both sides had achieved a major update of their original accord. "It needed to be more ambitious in the agricultural

sector, it needed to be more ambitious in services, it needed to be more ambitious in many of the elements that in the end we managed to agree on after two years of work," he said.

Guajardo said the deal would grant his country better access for products including orange juice, tuna, asparagus, honey, egg white albumin, as well as "equitable access" for meat products.

It is also set to recognise "geographical indications" for certain food and drink, a key EU demand.

Such indications protect agricultural produce - for example, dictating that the term "champagne" can only be used for sparkling wine from northern France.

It was not clear, however, how the divisive issue of "manchego" cheese had been settled. The EU says the term should only apply to sheep's milk cheese from central Spain, but Mexico has its own "manchego" made from cow's milk.

Negotiators from both sides will continue to work on technical details to produce a final text by the end of the year. (Source: Reuters)

Trump's oil rant misses new reality: high prices can help, too

President Donald Trump may have a problem with oil prices being "very high," but a decline would be a mixed bag for the U.S. economy, thanks to the boom in American energy production.

When prices plunged starting in mid-2014 and stayed low for the next two years, U.S. producers felt the pain, much more and longer than was expected. A pullback in demand for oil-related equipment slowed mining and manufacturing output cooled investment and hurt jobs. For consumers, though, it expanded purchasing power, as less-expensive fill-ups at the gasoline pump left more money to spend elsewhere -- supporting the biggest part of the economy.

The idea of cheap oil as a clear positive for the U.S. harks back to an earlier era when it would boost consumption, contain the trade deficit and hold down costs for businesses. Now oil prices play a more nuanced role: There's been a boom in shale oil production, helping reduce petroleum imports and boost exports. And the global energy-price recovery since mid-2017 has helped usher a rebound in U.S. manufacturing and capital spending, underpinning growth.

If oil prices were to drop again, the effect won't be "cut and dry the way it would've been even a few years ago," said Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpont Securities and a former Federal Reserve researcher.

U.S. production has "ramped up dramatically," so "from a growth perspective,



there are both winners and losers," he said. "It's one of those things where 90 percent of the economy benefits small and 10 percent gets hurt big."

Trump tweeted on Friday that "Oil prices are artificially Very High" because of OPEC, and the situation "will not be accepted." The crude glut that's weighed on prices for three years has almost been wiped out by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries' production cuts, and the group aims to drive fuel inventories even lower.

The closest U.S. allies within OPEC rejected Trump's accusation, including oil ministers

from Saudi Arabia, Russia and the United Arab Emirates. Before the president's tweet, energy ministers meeting in Saudi Arabia showed a desire to further tighten crude markets. Saudi Arabia is said to desire crude closer to \$80; earlier on Friday, it traded near \$74 a barrel in London.

Meanwhile, the U.S. is seeking global oil dominance, expanding its own oil production so it relies less on OPEC. That's increased the presence of American energy companies, and their desire for higher prices to facilitate growth, investment, profits and shareholder returns. Trump is seeking to

open ocean areas for offshore exploration and allowing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for the first time in four decades.

In recent years, American reliance on foreign petroleum has dropped. The country's trade deficit for petroleum products was \$7.35 billion in February, compared with \$41.8 billion in July 2008, the biggest in data back to 1994.

"Historically, lower oil prices have been a positive for U.S. growth, but the tremendous rise in domestic shale oil production over the past decade has created a powerful counterweight that has offset some of the benefit of lower prices," Randal Quarles, appointed by Trump last year to the Federal Reserve Board, said in a February speech. "In the immediate aftermath of the decline in oil prices, investment in the energy sector fell off precipitously, pushing down aggregate investment as well."

The recent pickup in gasoline costs isn't a major risk to household spending, which is benefiting from a strong job market and low borrowing costs. A sustained advance of more than \$1 per gallon, which would mark a return to pre-2014 oil-shock levels, could completely offset the aggregate disposable-income gains from the tax cuts, but the increase in fuel prices in the past year "clearly falls well short of this threshold," Torsten Slok, chief international economist at Deutsche Bank, wrote in a note this week.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Regulatory prioritizing, subsidies behind UK's renewable energy boom



In another major development for the UK's energy sector, the entire nation had gone without using any coal-generated energy for 55 consecutive hours, setting a new record for the first time in over a century. This comes as solar and wind power gain momentum, whilst strict environmental regulations have rendered many coal-fired plants unprofitable.

According to this outgoing week's UK energy grid data, London's stations went without using coal-fired power between 10:25 p.m. last Monday and 5:10 a.m. Thursday. During this period, wind turbines increased their energy output, suggesting an improved sustainability of renewable sources of energy.

This comes, however, as energy costs for consumers -- both business and private -- are still high in the UK. Whilst Britain has plans to develop shale oil on the English-Scottish border, governmental regulations might prevent or significantly delay such a development.

Some energy experts have suggested the use of fossil fuels is in "rapid decline," whilst others say the rising competitiveness of renewables is greatly attributed to governmental policies, regulations and the tax environment. Renewable energy is a highly-subsidized industry, as the costs of servicing and energy generation are high.

"The UK benefits from highly diverse and flexible sources of electricity and our energy mix continues to change," Fintan Slye of the UK's National Grid said. "However, it's important to remember coal is still an important source of energy as we transition to a low carbon system."

This outgoing week, some 60 percent of the UK's energy was generated by using low-carbon sources, including nuclear (20.1 percent), wind (33.7 percent), bi-

omass (5 percent), solar (3.3 percent) and hydro (0.9 percent).

Previously, the UK went without coal energy for a continuous 40 hours last October, and experts suggest that the use of high-carbon energy could pose further declines.

"More records [are] to be broken this summer as coal continues its rapid decline," analysts of Carbon Tracker, an energy think tank, said in a note.

Additionally, the UK's wind power recently posted a new record, producing some 14 gigawatts of power for the first time in history -- which constituted some 37 percent of the nation's energy needs.

The UK was among the first few advanced nations to adopt renewable sources of energy, and the government has supported the nascent industries for decades, hoping to get rid of fossil fuel imports. Britain's offshore fields of wind turbines are larger than those of any other nation, whilst its fields of solar panels are also impressive -- despite the hardly sunny weather.

Meanwhile, Britain's conventional power plants are closing at an accelerated pace, and some say this might undermine the UK's energy independence. Solar panels are made primarily in China and mounting concerns regarding trade disruptions might affect the UK's renewable energy sector.

However, British officials are planning to completely retire high-carbon energy generation by 2025, whilst increasingly providing regulatory approvals and subsidies to renewables. Solar and wind sources are also getting priority access to the nationwide power grid, stirring concerns of higher utility bills for British households.

(Source: Sputnik)

Why China's shale boom is struggling



A few years ago, there was a lot of talk about a Chinese shale revolution as the country's fast-growing demand for natural gas sparked enthusiasm in the exploration of its potentially huge shale gas reserves. Then the hype died down as it turned out that the enthusiasm was premature. Now it's back with a vengeance and a set of homegrown fracking technologies that could finally spur the development of those huge resources.

China has recoverable shale gas reserves of 1,115 trillion cu ft, the latest estimate of the Energy Information Administration from 2015 shows. This makes the country the biggest reservoir of shale gas, with Argentina a distant second with a little over 800 trillion cu ft. Yet, it is very unlikely that China will be able to repeat the U.S. shale gas boom.

China's shale gas deposits are in remote, geologically challenging areas. "Geologically challenging" means that they are in mountainous regions and the gas-bearing rocks are much deeper than they are in the U.S. shale patch. Also, the remoteness of these deposits means there is no established infrastructure for production and transportation of all these trillions of cubic feet of gas.

Of course, China is now known for giving up in the face of challenges, so it has been working to recover these recoverable cubic feet. Because of the geological peculiarities of its shale deposits, local energy companies have developed proprietary fracking methods specifically targeting the local gas-bearing rocks. They have also significantly cut their drilling costs. Compared with 2010, exploration well costs are down 40 percent, according to Wood Mackenzie, and production well costs are down by 25 percent since 2014.

Beijing is helping them along, as well. The government this month cut the resource tax on shale gas by 30 percent to stimulate

shale gas production as demand continues to expand at a breakneck pace. There are also subsidies that currently stand at about US\$0.048 (0.3 yuan) per cubic meter of shale gas although there are plans to lower them to US\$0.032 (0.2 yuan). Since these subsidies are essential for the biggest producers of shale gas in the country, CNPC and Sinopec, chances are the prospect of lowering them will spur more research into improving productivity and lowering costs.

The prospects for China's shale gas look bright even though the country will be unable to meet its ambitious 30-billion-cu-m production goal for 2020. The reasons it will be unable to meet it are the abovementioned: geology and infrastructure constraints. But China will double its shale gas production to 17 billion cu m a year by 2020, Wood Mac analysts said recently. China will add almost 700 new wells by 2020 at three large fields, two of them operated by PetroChina and one by Sinopec, all in the Northwest. The energy consultancy has estimated the combined investment in the new production capacity at US\$5.5 billion.

Still, this will not be a repeat of the U.S. shale boom. Rather, China's shale gas case is a slow evolution of technology and gradual climb of production because the constraints are not of the sort that can be eliminated in no time. According to some, the lack of an open market and lots of competition between producers is also affecting China's chances at a shale gas revolution, but Beijing has been proving repeatedly that its brand of planned economy surprisingly works, for the most part.

Where it doesn't seem to work--with respect to gas--is in making realistic plans about supply and demand in a way that would ensure there is enough of the former to satisfy the latter.

(Source: oilprice.com)

Petrobras receives three bids for natural gas unit

Petrobras has received three bids for a 2,800-mile (4,506 kilometer) natural gas pipeline system being sold as part of a wider push to raise cash through divestments, said people knowledgeable on the matter.

Mubadala Development along with EIG Global Energy Partners are leading one group while Sydney-based Macquarie Group Ltd. leads another that submitted bids on Thursday for Transportadora Associada de Gas, or TAG, the people said. A third bid includes French utility Engie SA, the people said, requesting not to be named because the information isn't yet public.

No details were given on the size of the bids, but the proposals were expected to go as high as \$8 billion including debt, people familiar with the process said earlier this

week. Petrobras will come to a decision in two or three weeks, though more information may be needed, one person said on Friday.

China's Silk Road Fund Co. and Italian Snam SpA joined the Mubadala and EIG group, the people said. Sao Paulo-based Itaúsa - Investimentos Itaú SA is competing for TAG in association with Sydney-based Macquarie, Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, and Singapore's GIC Private Ltd.

The sale of TAG, which spans ten Brazilian states, could be Petrobras' largest to date, accounting for more than a third of the state-controlled energy company's \$21 billion divestment target.

Petroleo Brasileiro SA, as the oil producer is formally known, Macquarie, EIG, Itaúsa, CPPIB and Silk

Road Fund declined to comment on the sale. Snam, Engie, GIC and Mubadala didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

In 2016 Petrobras sold Nova Transportadora do Sudeste, a similar but smaller pipeline network in Brazil's southeast, to a consortium led by Brookfield Asset Management for \$5.2 billion.

The TAG sale would add to growing foreign presence in Brazil's natural gas industry as Petrobras sheds side businesses to slash debt and focus on its most profitable oil projects in deep waters of the South Atlantic. In March, China's Shandong Kerui Petroleum signed a deal with Petrobras to invest in a natural gas processing plant in Rio de Janeiro state.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Fire on pipeline operated by Libya's Waha Oil Co extinguished: port engineer

A fire that broke out on a pipeline operated by Libya's Waha Oil Co that feeds Es Sider port has been brought under control, an engineer at the port said on Sunday.

Libya's National Oil Corp (NOC) had said it expected a loss of production of 70,000-100,000 barrels per day (bpd) because of the fire which broke out on Saturday.

NOC said it was investigating the fire 21km (13 miles) from North West Marada. A source from Waha said militants were suspected of attacking the pipeline.

Militants were blamed for a previous attack on the pipeline in December, when the NOC also reported a production loss of 70,000-100,000 bpd.

Fighters loyal to Islamic State are present in the area, Libyan officials have said.

The pipeline was repaired within a few days after the December attack.

(Source: Reuters)

Global oil supply surplus may soon become a shortage

Oil prices have rallied so far this year, as OPEC-led efforts have helped erase a big global surplus, but the market may soon suffer from a new dilemma: a shortage of crude supplies that would support further price gains.

Stockpiles of the commodity among the industrialized nations that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) stood at 2.84 billion barrels at the end of February, only 30 million barrels above the five-year average, according to a monthly report from the International Energy Agency (IEA).



"The global market has tightened considerably in recent months," says Matthew Parry, head of long-term research at research consultancy Energy Aspects. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries is "very close to achieving its originally stated aim of bringing OECD stocks back to parity with their five-year average."

"What we are seeing happening, and will occur much more frequently going forward, is that one-off [supply issues or threats] will start to have a more pronounced impact upon prices," says Parry.

When OPEC reached an agreement in late 2016 with some major non-OPEC producers, including Russia, to curb production, stocks were at roughly 348 million barrels above the five-year average, he says.

OPEC member Saudi Arabia has led the way, curbing supplies by around 0.7 million barrels a day between the third quarter of 2016 and the first quarter of this year, says Parry. Overall, "much of the adjustment isn't really a deliberate supply-cutting effort, but geopolitical troubles that forced supplies down," such as the 0.6 million barrel a day contraction in supplies over this period from Venezuela, which suffers from an economic crisis, or "problems with aging wells naturally depleting, such as those that have impacted Angola and China."

Still, OPEC wouldn't have achieved its goal without the recent strength in demand world-wide, says Parry. He views the supply drawdown as "largely a consequence" of stronger-than-expected demand.

For the past couple of months, the IEA has underestimated global demand, with its first-quarter 2018 estimate at 98.1 million barrels a day--which is likely about 0.3 million barrels a day short of true global demand, according to Parry.

Growth in U.S. crude production, meanwhile, shouldn't be seen as "anti-OPEC," he says, because "supply possibilities change with developments in technology and innovation, and will continue to do so going forward."

Energy Aspects is "reasonably optimistic" on U.S. supply growth of roughly 1.6 million barrels a day in 2018, but that's below the U.S. Energy Information Administration's recent growth estimate of two million barrels a day--and "we see looming infrastructure constraints playing a role in 2018," says Parry. He would even go so far as to say that the oil market may soon come up short on supplies, as OECD stocks could be over 100 million barrels below their five-year average by year-end.

"Geopolitical tensions have certainly been in the driver's seat recently as far as price moves, and their influence has gained precedence as the previous stock overhang has been diminished," says Parry.

The more recent price climb, with West Texas Intermediate crude futures CLM8, -0.40 percent jumping by 8.6 percent for the week ended April 13, came as the market grew concerned over a potential response to the alleged chemical attack in Syria that killed civilians earlier this month. U.S. President Donald Trump, in a combined effort with France and the UK, ordered airstrikes against Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's regime on April 13, raising the risk of retaliation from Syrian allies, and major oil producers, Russia and Iran. The U.S. had already issued new sanctions on Russia, in part due to what it referred to as Moscow's attempt to subvert Western democracies, and the U.S. is due to decide on May 12 whether to extend sanction waivers under the nuclear deal with Iran. While the U.S. strikes on the Assad regime in Syria are "not material by themselves for the oil market, especially as they avoided targeting Russian bases, the risks of an escalation with Iran will not go away," says Parry.

He wouldn't be surprised if WTI prices broke through \$80 a barrel "toward the latter stages" of next year. The U.S. benchmark settled at \$68.40 a barrel Friday--seven cents below Wednesday's finish at the highest since December 2014. "We envisage further stock draws over the remainder of 2018, potentially bringing stocks down by, on average, 0.5 [million barrels a day]" this year, says Parry.

(Source: Market Watch)

Saudi leadership offers Israel a chance

By Uri Savir

Is Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the big change-maker for his country and the region? He certainly has the ambitions to reflect and work on major reforms.

A senior U.S. diplomat in Tel Aviv told Al-Monitor that both the White House and the State Department were highly impressed with the young guest when he visited the United States in mid-March.

Mohammed is very different from previous Saudi leaders. He talked to U.S. President Donald Trump about modernizing and moderating Saudi Arabia. He sees Iran as his country's arch-enemy, together with the Muslim Brotherhood and Sunni and Shiite terror organizations. On these security issues, he found common ground with Trump. The alliance with the United States is of prime interest to his strategy, and he keeps in regular contact with the president's son-in-law, White House senior adviser Jared Kushner.

The crown prince is opposed to the Iran nuclear deal and would support any decision on the matter Trump makes in May.

Mohammed impressed his American interlocutors and audiences with his vision for his country (Saudi Arabia 2030), including a more moderate Islam, greater rights for women and a modernized economy less dependent on oil.

According to the U.S. diplomat, the crown prince implied that in the future he would be ready to cooperate with Israel, provided there is Israeli-Palestinian peace. He perceives Israel as a technological and security powerhouse and is the first Saudi leader to speak about Israel's right to have its nation-state alongside a Palestinian state. Except for referring to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, conditioning normalization with Israel on a two-state solution, he did not elaborate on his views on a solution to the permanent-status issues, probably awaiting an eventual U.S. peace initiative. He did mention East Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque as core interests of the Saudi regime. Mohammed also spoke about his alliances with Egypt, Jordan, the Persian Gulf states (except Qatar) and the Maghreb, creating an anti-Iran axis.

The U.S. diplomat told Al-Monitor that the new Saudi position creates new opportunities for Israeli-Saudi cooperation, but that significant progress must first take place toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

This is not the first Saudi conditional opening to Israel. Al-Monitor has learned from a former adviser to the late President Shimon Peres that both one and two decades ago, discreet Israeli talks had taken place with senior representatives of the Saudi crown. In both instances, the Saudis were open to normalizing relations with Israel, provided Israel could accept a two-state solution based on the 1967 lines.

A senior Israeli Foreign Ministry official told Al-Monitor that Israel has firsthand knowledge of the Saudi openness on security and technological cooperation, at least openness for some discreet cooperation. A more open relationship could be created parallel to progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. The Israeli official blamed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' alleged weakness and rejectionism for blocking any such progress.

In fact, the Palestinian leadership keeps in close contact with Riyadh. According to a senior PLO official close to Abbas, ties are good. He further claimed that all talks about Saudi Arabia normalizing its relations with Israel before a two-state solution is reached are false. What links Saudi Arabia and the Palestinians is above all the strong bond to Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa.

Given the winds of change expressed by the Saudi crown prince, it is clear that there is a new opportunity for a regional peace process. Saudi Arabia today is ready to engage with Israel, in parallel with a two-state solution process, and not only following a withdrawal to the 1967 lines as expressed in the Arab Peace Initiative.

It is up to both the United States and Israel to take the Saudi leader by his word. A realistic two-state solution based on the Arab Peace Initiative, even with U.S. input, would set in motion a transformative regional process, affecting Israel's relations with Egypt, Jordan and the Persian Gulf.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will not take yes for an answer.

(Source: Al Monitor)

Dislike Comey, despise Trump

By Charles M. Blow

We are now in the midst of an epic clash between Donald Trump and fired FBI Director James Comey, neither of whom I hold in high esteem, both men with raging egos and questionable motives.

The depth of my contempt differs between the two, but there is contempt for both. Comey is now making the rounds promoting his new book, which will no doubt be a monster best seller.

Good for him. But Comey for me is a complicated character, a man of honorable service and flashes of horrendous judgment.

His inexplicable handling of the investigations into Clinton's emails is unforgivable.

He made reckless and harmful disclosures and proclamations about the Clinton investigation while not whispering a word about the concurrent investigation into the Trump campaign.

He says that the letter he released about a new phase of the Clinton email investigation just days before the election may have been colored by polling suggesting that Clinton was going to win, but that too is problematic.

As Nate Silver tweeted Friday: "If Comey's decision to release the letter on Oct. 28 was influenced by his interpretation of the polls, that really ought to cut against his image as an honorable, principled decision-maker. Instead, he was just being expedient and trying to save his own hide."

There were many factors that played into the 2016 election result. The work of Cambridge Analytica on behalf of the Trump campaign. The exploitation of social media.

The Clinton campaign's miscalculations.

The actual content of John Podesta's emails. Voter suppression. False impressions given by the polls that Clinton was sure to win. Racism, xenophobia, misogyny and ethno- and religious hostility disguised as economic anxiety.

But Comey was also in that mix. While we may never be able to weigh the factors that contributed to Clinton's defeat and Trump's victory, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Comey's actions were part of them. So please forgive me if I don't rise in applause simply because Comey's revelations are giving Trump agita.

Nor expect the dampening of my condemnation of Comey because Trump World seeks to defame him.

To be sure, the situation in Syria is a humanitarian crisis and has been for years.

The last report on the Syrian death toll by the United Nations came from 2016, when an official said 400,000 people had been killed. The UN said at that time it was virtually impossible to accurately verify how many people had died. →13

America can't be trusted anymore

It's hard to be powerful when nobody believes a word you say

BY Stephen M. Walt

One of the most overused clichés in contemporary U.S. diplomacy is Ronald Reagan's invocation of a Russian proverb: "Trust but Verify." Originally used in the context of the Cold War, it conveyed that Washington should be willing to reach agreements with its adversaries but only if it could be sure the other side would live up to its commitments. It was a nice way to indicate both flexibility and toughness, which is of course why people refer to it whenever the United States is contemplating new negotiations with one of its adversaries.

Implicit in Reagan's dictum is the idea that Americans are honest, plain-speaking truth-tellers who can be counted upon to keep their word and fulfill their promises. America's opponents, by contrast, are a slippery bunch of deceptive charlatans who will exploit any loophole and seize any opportunity to hoodwink the country. Accordingly, U.S. negotiators must insist on all sorts of intrusive measures to make sure they can verify what others are really up to. Reagan's proverb notwithstanding, the importance the United States attaches to verification is really a reminder that there is damn little trust involved.

Lately, however, I've been wondering whether this wariness has things backward. Is the real problem that Washington can't trust others, or rather that other states can't trust it? Even before Deceitful Donald showed up, the United States had amassed a pretty good record of renegeing on promises and commitments. At a minimum, Washington cannot claim any particular virtue or trustworthiness in its dealings with others. In the unipolar era, in fact, the United States repeatedly did things it had promised not to do.

To be sure, this is how one expects great powers to behave, especially when important matters are at stake. The Athenians famously told the Melians that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," and that logic did not escape U.S. leaders throughout the country's history. Think about all the treaties U.S. officials signed with various Native American tribes and subsequently broke, modified, or reneged upon as the nation expanded steadily across North America. Or consider the Nixon shocks of 1971, when the United States unilaterally ended convertibility of the dollar into gold, in effect dismantling the Bretton Woods economic order it had helped create. President Richard Nixon also slapped a 10 percent surcharge on imports to make sure the U.S. economy didn't suffer as the dollar rose in value.

Or consider some more recent events. As more and more documents come to light, it has become clear that U.S. officials convinced their Soviet counterparts to permit German reunification by promising that NATO would not expand further. Secretary of State James Baker told Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not go "1 inch eastward" and Gorbachev received similar assurances from a host of other Western officials as well. President Bill Clinton's administration blithely ignored these assurances, however, in its overzealous rush to create what it thought



At a minimum, Washington cannot claim any particular virtue or trustworthiness in its dealings with others. In the unipolar era, in fact, the United States repeatedly did things it had promised not to do.

would be a "zone of peace" well to the east. As a number of observers warned at the time, this decision poisoned relations with Moscow and was the first step leading back to the level of confrontation we are dealing with today. That blunder was compounded by the George W. Bush administration's decision to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002. While technically not a breach of trust (i.e., the treaty permitted either party to leave if it wished, provided it gave adequate notice), it was still a clear signal that the United States didn't care about preserving good relations with Moscow and was not going to take Russian sensitivities into account.

Similarly, America's handling of the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea does not inspire confidence in its trustworthiness either. There is no question that North Korea violated the agreement by secretly working on an alternative enrichment path, but the United States never lived up to its commitments either. In particular, it failed to lift economic sanctions as promised, and the light-water power reactors it had pledged to provide were delayed for years and ultimately never arrived. As Stephen Bosworth, the veteran U.S. diplomat who headed the multinational effort to implement the agreement, later put it, "The Agreed

Framework was a political orphan within two weeks after its signature."

And then there's the checkered history of U.S. policy toward Libya. Building on a successful multilateral sanctions program, the Bush administration successfully convinced Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi to let American inspectors enter the country, dismantle his entire weapons of mass destruction program, and cart it away. To get the agreement, however, Bush promised Qaddafi that the United States would not attempt to overthrow his regime. It was a clear quid pro quo: Qaddafi gave up his weapons programs, and the United States promised not to do to him what it did to Saddam Hussein. But then a few years later, President Barack Obama's administration ignored that earlier pledge and collaborated in Qaddafi's overthrow.

But wait, there's more! The multinational operation against Qaddafi was authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1973, and Russia agreed to abstain on the resolution because its stated purpose was preventing Qaddafi from attacking civilians in Benghazi, not toppling the regime. However, as Stephen R. Weissman has shown in an important article, regime change was on U.S. officials' minds from the get-go, and they soon blew right past the terms of the

resolution. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates later recalled, "The Russians felt they had been played for suckers on Libya. They felt there had been a bait and switch." And they were right.

Needless to say, the lessons of Libya have not been lost on other countries. North Korean media have repeatedly invoked this example to justify the country's nuclear weapons program and to warn against ever trusting assurances from the United States. And it doesn't take a genius to figure out why. If you were Kim Jong Un, would you rather pin your survival on a nuclear deterrent of your own or promises from the United States?

Which brings us to Donald Trump. The world is now dealing with a U.S. president who appears to have no firm convictions or beliefs, the attention span of a hummingbird, and who apparently makes important national security decisions on the basis of whatever fairytale he just saw on Fox & Friends. As near as one can tell, he never saw a treaty or agreement signed by his predecessor that he liked, even though he has trouble explaining what's wrong with any of them. He just likes to talk about "tearing them up" no matter what the consequences may be.

(Source: Foreign Policy)

A guide to watching Arab elections

Any hope of the Arab world embracing democracy has long focused on its most populous country, Egypt. Yet despite a burst of freedom after the 2011 Arab Spring, Egypt again dashed those hopes in a sham election designed to keep military strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in power.

The one opposition figure allowed to run in the March 26-28 election barely campaigned. Only about 40 percent of voters, who were largely ordered to go to the polls, cast a ballot. The mirage of democracy was easy to see through.

To be sure, Sisi remains popular for ousting the other extreme on the political spectrum from his own secular authoritarianism. In 2013, he led a coup against the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, who was duly elected but quickly started coercing democratic opponents.

The Middle East can't seem to shake its three governing models: nationalist dictators, reigning monarchs, and radical Islamists. But notice this. All three have something in common: the denial of the liberty of conscience. All three believe it their sole right to determine which, if any, of its opponents can participate in governance.

To really track progress in Arab politics, it is far better to focus on Tunisia. For three years after ousting a dictator in the Arab Spring, Tunisians held a public debate while crafting a new constitution. The most difficult part was defining liberty of conscience. No Arab constitution until then included such a phrase.

Many Islamists in Tunisia as well as the elite remnants of the former dictatorship opposed the notion of individual freedom in faith, speech, and other areas of life. Nonetheless, the idea was enshrined in the 2014 Constitution. And it has begun to sink into the thinking of this largely Muslim country in North Africa.

On May 6, Tunisia will hold its first municipal elections since the Arab Spring. The campaign has yet to officially start. Yet the enthusiasm is hard to miss. In the one Arab country that most firmly embraces individual rights, more than 57,000 people have signed up to run for offices in 350 cities and towns.

By law, political parties must include candidates from three groups: women, youth, and those with disabilities.



Egypt's sham election doesn't deserve as much attention as a real one this May in an Arab nation that embraces liberty of conscience.

As a result, nearly 50 percent of those running are women, while more than 50 percent are under the age of 35. One in 10 has a disability. But what really surprised observers was the high number of independents. That is viewed as a sign of disgust among youth toward traditional parties as well as frustration over a stagnant economy.

Such a breadth of representation speaks to Tunisians' understanding of the liberty of conscience. "Religion should not divide the society," says Rachid Ghannouchi, head of the moderate Islamist party. In 2016 he an-

nounced his party, Ennahda, would separate political and religious activities.

After the local elections, the central government is expected to take up a bill that would grant more powers to municipalities. Tunisia could be about to see a new flourishing of its democracy, which would serve even more as an example for the region. Other Arab nations such as Egypt do not deserve as much fawning attention to their politics. At least not until they adhere to freedom of conscience. (Source: The CSM)

Israeli-Saudi alliance behind war crimes in Syria: ex-U.S. senate candidate

and that the President has every intention of continuing to facilitate the ongoing violations of international law and American Constitutional standards that has characterized his predecessors in terms of illegitimate military actions and interventions in the Middle East that are chiefly at the behest of Israel, the central banks, and the Saudi Arabian regime that knows its own survivability depends on the continuation of the American Petrodollar as the reserve currency of the world, even as this regime continues to pursue the support of Wahhabic terrorists and extremists to destroy Iran and Shiite Muslim interests in the region. The appointments of Nikki Haley as the American Ambassador to the UN, Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State, and John Bolton as the National Security Advisor to the President are classic examples of this hijacking, even as these appointments and the American war crimes in Syria underscore that Mr. Trump's «America First» campaign rhetoric in 2016 and his accompanying promises to get the United States out of Syria and these other Middle Eastern military interventions is now but a proven pack of lies.

The salient fact is this: The United States has had a long history of employing false flag incidents, provocations, and deliberately falsified media spins to sell and justify its ignition of a series of wars. The «Spanish sinking» of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor to begin the Spanish-American War; the Lusitania incident at the outset of World War I; the real circumstances of FDR's deliberate arrangements from October 1940 onward to compel the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor; the actions of the United States in South Korea from 1945-48 in support of the Rhee regime in Seoul which set the stage for the Korean War between 1950-53; the Operation Northwoods plan to start a war with Castro's Cuba in the early 1960s (proposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and vetoed by President Kennedy); the phony Gulf of Tonkin resolution which began overt American military intervention in Vietnam; the October 1990 employment of Nayirah al-Sabah, daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States, to give false and rehearsed testimony to the American Congress directed and coached by the Hill and Knowlton public relations firm on how Iraqi soldiers were taking Kuwaiti children out of hospital incubators to induce death; the deliberately false claims of the American government as to who and what was behind the September 11, 2001 attacks; and the outlandish claims of George W. Bush and Colin Powell complete with falsified «intelligence» that the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was necessary because of Saddam Hussein's possession of «Weapons of Mass Destruction.» are all classic examples of this. These many lies in history preceded the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, where Seymour Hersh and others have subsequently proven that the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey were importing, training,



and supplying the Wahhabic extremists of every label being used against the Assad regime in an attempt to overthrow him. It is chiefly this alliance against Assad, Iran, and Putin's Russia, that has resulted in at least 500,000 deaths and the displacement of millions of Syrians with the meter still running. It is this alliance which has been using the American and Zionist media to falsely demonize Assad, Iran, and Russia, making false accusations about Assad and the employment of chemical weapons on his part, even while ignoring the support of the United States for the provable genocidal war crimes of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, the recent murder by Israel of over a thousand unarmed demonstrators in Gaza, and the regular employment by both the United States and Israel in recent years of white phosphorus and depleted uranium munitions in several regional conflicts. And it is this alliance which seeks war with Iran, for the express purpose of what John Bolton and his Zionist friends' term «regime change.»

■ Many experts have described the attack as a «political show». What do you think?

A: The attack may indeed be fairly characterized as a «political show.» It is designed to demonstrate the President's primary fealty to the Zionist State of Israel, the central banking system extant since the post-World War II Bretton Woods conference, the gas and oil pipeline interests, and the military-industrial complex. It must also be said that this attack occurred without a scintilla of evidence that a chemical attack actually occurred, or that said the chemical attack was carried out by the Assad regime. The attack preempted the arrival of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and its scheduled examination of the site of the alleged attack for substantive evidence and evaluation of the Western claims of what had allegedly transpired, claims based on the allegations of the totally discredited White Helmets and the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, both front organizations for Western Neo-Conservative ideologues in American, British, and Israeli intelligence. Additionally, the attack took place without either the explicit authorization of the Unit-

ed Nations Security Council (UNSC) or the issuance of the so-called Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) by the United States Congress. And two other critical questions about the American, British, and French charade must be asked 1): Why on earth would Bashar al-Assad risk a chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta when his military and their Russian allies were prevailing there and elsewhere in the restoration of stability in Syria under the control of the legitimate and sovereign government of that country? I saw a satirical post on social media a few days ago that underscores how ludicrous the claims of the United States, Britain, France, and the Zionist-Saudi alliance are on this key point. The post depicts a poster of Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*. Humorously, but on point, Sun Tzu supposedly says, «When your enemy is nearly defeated, and final victory is at hand, gas your own people so that nations greater than yours will intervene and destroy you.» Secondly, 2) If as Trump and his advisors claim, the American strikes hit chemical weapons factories, why were there no poisonous chemical gases distributed among the population causing horrible injuries and a massive number of deaths? We hear Robert Fisk and Paul Craig Roberts, among others questioning all this, but nary a word in the Zionist-controlled American corporate media, where these ludicrous postulates are parroted by CNN and the Washington Post, and accepted at face value by an American public that should have figured out something since the Bush and Powell Circus in 2003. It is frightening.

■ How do you see the role of Israel and Saudi Arabia in the attack?

A: As previously indicated, the Israeli-Saudi alliance has its fingerprints all over these illegal and criminal activities in Syria. Former New York Times correspondent Stephen Kinzer fully acknowledges the truth of this. He states unequivocally that the latest American military machinations in Syria are designed to prevent peace and partnership among the governments of Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, as the «United States-Israel-Saudi Arabia coalition» will not allow a peaceful flourishing of these countries and

their political independence from this coalition's control. Kinzer underscores that from Washington's perspective, peace in Syria is the ultimate horror scenario. Peace would mean that Russia, Iran, and Assad have won in Syria. The United States, in Kinzer's words, is determined «to prevent that, regardless of the human cost.»

■ In a tweet following the attack, President Trump said, «A perfectly executed strike last night. Thank you to France and the United Kingdom for their wisdom and the power of their fine Military. Could not have had a better result. Mission Accomplished!» What was the mission?

A: Trump's statement of «Mission Accomplished» brings one back in memory to the infamous «Mission Accomplished» speech of George W. Bush on May 1st, 2003 on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln. If by «Mission Accomplished,» Mr. Trump is signaling that the United States is going to sink even deeper in economic debt, and political and military quicksand in Palestine, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen prior to an insane American-Israeli military strike on Iran, one may deem his latest war crime in Syria a success. To the rest of us, his actions are foreboding in terms of moving the United States closer to a global conflict that may also involve Russia and potentially China. This is aside from the real prospect posited by David Stockman, that the present national American debt of \$21 trillion will stand at \$40 trillion a decade from now, as the American Empire moves toward being but the latest Empire in history to fade into eventual eclipse for the usual reasons.

■ What would happen if the U.S. and its allies bomb Syria again?

A: I do not believe that Vladimir Putin will stand by and allow the United States and its Israeli and Saudi allies to contravene the successful results of the Russian intervention on behalf of the sovereign government of Syria. I do not believe that he will stand by and watch an illegal and criminal American and Israeli military assault on Iran. He recognizes that to do so would be to signal his own unwillingness to defend Russian borders and Russian territory from the very real possibility of the NATO and American military buildup on his doorstep being used in an actual future invasion of his own country. Therefore, if the United States, France, and Britain continue to break international law with these actions in Syria, some response on his part will be inevitable. I recall that one of his government spokesmen said after the Trump strikes that «There will be consequences. We have a pre-arranged scenario in place.» The Russian spokesman most pointedly did not spell out what that «pre-arranged scenario» entailed. Let us pray that Trump, his simian advisors, and his Israeli-Saudi allies are not reckless enough to risk finding out what that «pre-arranged scenario» is all about. But rest assured, the Russians, the Iranians, and the Chinese know what it is, and lie in wait.

Conflicts intensified between Russia and West

1 → The role of Donald Trump's government in directing the Skripal case and its consequent tensions is undeniable. In the first place, Washington tried to turn the English-Russian dispute into a «NATO-Russia» conflict or a «West-Russia» dispute. Thus it perfectly defended England, and even took a firmer position than London towards the Skripal case! The British government was also fully satisfied with the role of the United States in this case. However, we are now witnessing the formation of a thorough confrontation between the West and Russia. But the main question here is whether the Skripal case is the «starting point» of Moscow's opposition to the West in 2018? Or should it be referred to as an «outstanding point»? In response to this question, we should pay attention to several subjects:

Firstly, during 2017, we have witnessed the formation of widespread conflict between Russia and NATO. As many analysts of strategic affairs emphasize, the level of disputes between Russia and the West has increased far more than the previous years, and has entered the «military phase». It's not without a reason that Russian President «Vladimir Putin» has taken a more closed position against the United States and the European Union over the past two years! The continuation of this process could lead to military confrontation (though limited) between Moscow and some European countries in the near future. In the meantime, the efforts of some European parties, such as the middle left socialist



parties, have not been successful in improving the current crises.

The second point is that the Skripal case will affect the relations between Russia and Britain, and even beyond, Russia and NATO for years. The recent crisis raised between Moscow and the West is the continuation of previous extensive crises. Hence, in analyzing the Skripal case and its impact on Russia-NATO relations, we should also take the backgrounds and underlying factors into consideration. We can say that NATO is using this case to put Moscow under pressure. Meanwhile, the United States insists on

maintaining tension between Russia and NATO more than others. Russia's response in the expulsion of 60 American diplomats (compared with the expulsion of 23 British diplomats) suggests that the Kremlin regards Washington, and not London, as its main opponent in this dispute.

The third point here is about the concerns of the European members of the Nato. Many European countries, under the pressure of the United States and Britain, have been forced to follow London and Washington merely because of their membership in NATO. In this equation, the EU will receive the most negative impact from the existing and future conflicts. Although the United Europe has apparently tried to improve the relations between Moscow and Washington, it should not be forgotten that many of the EU members are also NATO members at the same time. On the other hand, many European players have tied their security to NATO. Obviously, in such a situation, the conflicts raised between Russian and Europe is complicated!

Finally, the Skripal case will shade over Russia-Western relations for years. Currently there is no sign of NATO members trying to solve this problem. The fact is players such as the United States and Britain, are rather trying to use this case in opposition to the Kremlin. However, Russia has also shown that it will use issues such as «energy» and «strengthening bilateral relations with some European countries» in the confrontation scene with the West.

U.S. seductions are dangerous balderdash

1 → This will all be revealed in the next economic recession, which may occur sooner rather than later, and with such all the skeletons of mismanagement and dishonesty are going to emerge from the closet. In some ways I look on the Iranian situation the same way I do the allied Syrians under Assad. For now Assad has «won» the war there, and seems to be more or less popular for having done so and driven many of the crazy terrorists to defeat. Sure, Assad is not a «perfect» leader (and he is a dictator of sorts), just as no country, including Iran, can claim perfection of governance. But anyone who slanders Assad seems not mindful of the fact that over time it will be the Syrian people who will ultimately decide Assad's long term fate, based on his

governance in a Syria that may no longer be under such strident attack by Western and Saudi and Zionists interests. The same can be said for Iran: Iranians themselves will ultimately decide the continued evolution of the Islamic Revolution, and this can best be accomplished without Iranians presuming the US and its proxies care about Iran generally except to gain control of its people and resources for largely selfish ends. I simply insist that Iranians keep up their opposition to Western and Zionist imperialism until it has been hobbled, and it will be in time.

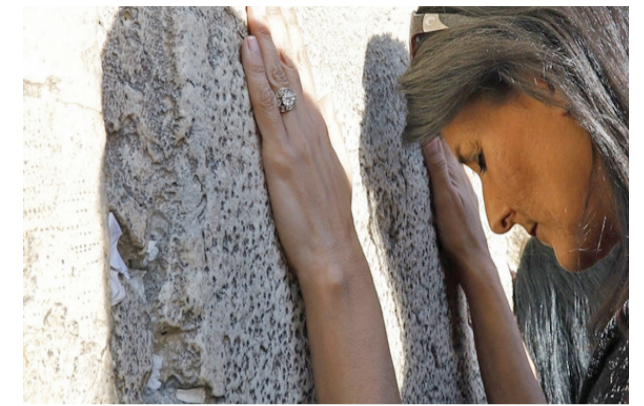
For now, the «West» is engaged in a huge effort to maintain hegemony, and the moronic recent attack on Syria by May and Macron and Trump seems to be mostly war



making over the «right» of the U.S. to do whatever the hell it wants without abiding by international law, facts on the ground

and even common sense. And all the while many countries are actively seeking ways to explore other options and literally creating a fresh, alternative, multi-polar world, which is exactly what Russia's Putin has been demanding for several years along with other leaders. Regarding Putin, it is quite remarkable that Time magazine, which 50 years ago had a vast readership, reportedly and recently published a list of its 100 most influential people worldwide, and Vladimir Putin did not make the list. I am quite sure no Iranian leaders made the list, too. No one can or should trust the mainstream media in the US. I am under the impression that Iran's media seems more «open» to diverse opinion and fact.

Haley says 'I don't get confused': She is confused!



TEHRAN (FNA) — Like everyone in the Trump White House, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has been stained forever with lies and deception. Eventually everyone, including Nikki Haley, must sink to lying for the U.S. president.

For a start, she has just hit back at the White House, denying a top adviser's claim that she was confused when she said the U.S. would impose new sanctions on Russia. «With all due respect, I don't get confused,» Haley said in a statement that was read on-air. Haley's pointed statement came hours after top White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said that Haley «got ahead of the curve» when she announced that the administration would roll out the sanctions the next day.

The truth is that the U.S. ambassador to the UN has got ahead of the curve on other fronts as well, such as momentary confusion about Syria, Russia and Iran:

■ Syria

Whenever you see her on video she's trying to start World War Three. At the UN Security Council Haley gives remarks about why the UN should take action against two of the U.S. power establishment's favorite targets, Russia and the Syrian government, due to allegations that President Bashar al-Assad has been using chemical weapons. However, she has been successful to some extent. Last week the Trump administration, together with the UK and France, bombed Syria for allegedly using chemical weapons in Douma. This is while the tired old chemical weapons allegations have been unearthed and ridiculed even by trusting Western mainstream media audiences for quite a sometime now.

It seems the warmongers didn't even bother to wait for a report by the UN chemical weapons inspectors from Douma. They deliberately overlooked the significance of many reports from others, the site of the supposed chemical weapons attack last week. For instance, senior doctors at the clinic that treated victims of what a video purported to show were chemical weapons used by the Syrian government say the video was real, but did not show the effects of a chemical weapons attack.

This is what one doctor said: «There was a lot of shelling and aircraft were always over Douma at night – but on this night, there was wind and huge dust clouds began to come into the basements and cellars where people lived. People began to arrive here suffering from hypoxia, oxygen loss. Then someone at the door, a 'White Helmet', shouted 'Gas!' and a panic began. People started throwing water over each other. Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see is people suffering from hypoxia – not gas poisoning.»

■ Russia

Haley always paints a damning picture of Iran's compliance with the landmark nuclear deal brokered and signed by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany.

Still, that didn't stop Ambassador Haley from calling out the Russian government for what she called its «unilateral responsibility» for the use of chemical weapons in Syria! She said the attack by the Syrian government constitutes «one of the most blatant and grotesque violations of international law in the world today.» Mind you, Russian officials didn't sit on their hands either. They said their government could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the suspected chemical attack on the rebel-held enclave in Syria was a hoax staged by British spies.

There are many, many, many piles of evidence substantiating the fact that the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies have become the target of what is surely one of the largest and most sophisticated propaganda campaigns in human history. For instance, the original source of this particular report from Douma – the White Helmets – is an extremely shady organization with extensive ties to both terrorist groups and Western warmongers. It is now a known and admitted fact that the U.S. has been arming terrorist factions in Syria to advance its regime change agendas, and that they have launched chemical attacks only to blame it on Syria to stir an international response. This is a known fact. To that end, they always enlist certain groups in fabricating psychological warfare as well, in this case, the White Helmets in Douma.

■ Iran

There's no reason to trust Haley's criticisms of, or plans for replacing, the JCPOA either. She always paints a damning picture of Iran's compliance with the landmark nuclear deal brokered and signed by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany. Speaking at the Security Council, Haley repeatedly suggests that Tehran is cheating and that «hundreds of suspicious sites are out of reach for UN inspectors.»

This is while the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog agency, has not uncovered any violations by Tehran. The IAEA reports have certified that Iran is in full compliance. Haley's deliberate refusal to certify compliance shows yet again how confused she really is about this internationally «done deal».

If you are tempted to feel sorry for Nikki Haley or any other member of the Trump White House, the above-mentioned facts and points would surely have cured you of the impulse. Watching them defend President Trump and his dangerous lies only reminds us of how they sold their soul when they took the job in the first place. As is, to work for Trump is to acquiesce to all that he is: A self-centered liar, crook, bigot, and incompetent. Haley is no exception. Like Trump, she has combined all of these nefarious qualities.

Macron's visit will test the Franco-American security partnership

By Erik Brattberg, Philippe Le Corre

As President Donald Trump prepares to welcome his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, for the first ever state visit of his presidency, Paris and Washington are closer now than they have been since the early days of the Iraq War.

However, with imminent decisions on several issues — ranging from Syria and the Iran nuclear deal to trade tariffs — on the horizon, the Macron-Trump “bromance” may not last much longer. Despite a shared love of pageantry and pomp, there is a real question if Macron will be able to leverage his personal chemistry with Trump and the close relationship between the two countries’ diplomatic corps and defense establishments to deliver tangible results for

France and its partners in Europe.

Of the leaders of the West’s great powers, only Macron seems to have cracked the code on captivating Trump. Macron’s enthusiastic persona and his image as a “winner” — having been elected with a 66 percent majority, followed by a landslide victory in parliamentary elections giving him full constitutional powers — has charmed and impressed Donald Trump.

Furthermore, the recovering French economy and Macron’s domestic reform efforts have also not gone unnoticed in the White House. Trump and Macron also share many similar views when it comes to how to address economic challenges posed by the rise of China.

Meanwhile, the European Union’s other major

leader — Angela Merkel — has struggled to engage effectively with Trump. Merkel who enjoyed a very close relationship with Obama was viewed with suspicion by Trump from the beginning. Merkel’s difficulties with forming a coalition government has weakened her international standing. That, along with open disagreements with Trump over Germany’s defense spending and trade surplus, have caused the two leaders to go an unprecedented five months without talking to each other. Merkel is slated to arrive in Washington to meet Trump just a few days after Macron, only their meeting is expected to be more subdued.

The most important reason for the closer Franco-American working relationship, however, is hard power. The United States remains the world’s top

military spender, but France — a P5 member and soon-to-be-only nuclear power in the EU — has become the EU’s sold credible security partner in the eyes of both the Obama and Trump administrations.

■ Trump criticizing NATO

President Trump spent much of his campaign criticizing NATO, so he is pleased that France’s defense spending is close to NATO’s 2 percent spending target, which Macron has committed to reaching by 2025. France’s military has also deployed forces in Iraq and Syria and has worked closely with Washington on counterterrorism and in Mali. France’s current foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, formerly the defense minister, enjoys a stellar reputation among Washington’s

security establishment.

All of this leaves Macron uniquely positioned to convey French and European concerns to the White House. But in doing so he also has the unenviable task of attempting to bridge the gap that has been growing across the Atlantic since Trump’s election. Cozying up to Trump — who enjoys dismal popularity figures in Europe — will not be tolerated for long unless it brings concrete results.

So what does Macron need to get something out of this relationship? Staking out a common stance on Syria’s Assad regime is a top priority. No doubt Macron will take a strong view on this issue, and will try to convince Trump to keep forces from Syria. France has a particular interest here since it continues to face ISIS attacks at home. ➔13

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Is technology good for little kids?

Yup, it's 2011, when most preschoolers don't know how to tie their shoelaces but they can understand—as if by osmosis—how to use the latest electronic gadget. Although we know that it's essential for our kids to be able to navigate the byways of our wired world in order to excel at school and beyond, it's hard not to be stunned by how technology seems to have taken over our lives.

A study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation last year found that school-age kids spend an average of 7 1/2 hours a day in front of a television, a computer, a smartphone, or another digital device. That's one hour and 17 minutes more than they did when the last study was done five years ago. The fact that most devices are mobile gives kids access in places they never had it before: on the school bus, in the doctor's waiting room, or on a drive to Grandma's. Although the Kaiser study involved 8- to 18-year-olds, anyone who has more than one child knows that little brothers and sisters not only follow in their older siblings' footsteps, they're barely a baby step behind.



Brave New World

We've seen an explosion of media targeted at those very same infants and toddlers who aren't supposed to be watching—including TV shows, DVDs, digital books, and a huge array of software and portable gaming platforms. But given the choice, kids prefer to use Mommy's or Daddy's devices. In fact, 60 percent of the top-selling apps on iTunes target young children, according to a 2009 analysis by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, which studies the role of digital technologies in childhood literacy. (Parents offers its own line of apps, including Flash Cards, which teach colors, shapes, letters, and math.)

Experts who are worried about how immersed kids have become in interactive media point to studies linking heavy screen time to obesity, difficulty paying attention, an inability to make real-world friends, dulled imagination, low academic performance, and increased aggression. More important, they argue, digital technology robs kids of the hands-on creative play that's so essential for development. However, other experts and parents applaud the fact that technology makes learning fun and engages kids in exploring and problem-solving.

Content counts

"Technology itself doesn't create problems," says Dr. Rich. "What matters is what we do with it." Just as you monitor the foods your kids eat, you should introduce quality media when they're ready, help them think about what they see and hear, and make sure they're not sacrificing time for homework, physical activity, family, or friends.

Especially when your kids are young, it's best to play or watch with them and discuss what they see.

Research underscores the importance of one-on-one time for learning. A 2010 study, for example, found that when kids were read to by a parent—as opposed to watching a video in which a person read to them—the part of their brain that involves emotions and problem-solving lit up.

What makes a computer program, an app, or a TV show educational can be summed up in one word: content. "A well-designed program can improve literacy or math skills and boost school readiness no matter what format it's delivered on," says Deborah Linebarger, Ph.D., director of the Children's Media Lab at the University of Pennsylvania. Software should be tailored to their developmental stage and have a simple story line (no flashbacks or cutaways). It also needs characters with whom kids can connect, as well as lots of repetition, and it should let a child move at her own pace.

Of course, it's also wise to shield young children from scary or violent media and overly commercial products. "Children under 7 can't always differentiate between fantasy and reality," says Liz Perle, editor-in-chief and cofounder of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit organization that helps parents better understand technology and its effect on kids.

Connected Kids

Even experts who are skeptical about younger children's growing media use recognize its value. Simply knowing how to use a computer translates into academic confidence. Simulation software and multimedia encyclopedias open windows (no pun intended) for students that weren't available even five years ago. Want to watch butterflies emerge from their chrysalis? Find out why Pluto is no longer a planet? A few clicks takes you inside the American Museum of Natural History to ask why.

Learning how to live in a high-tech world effectively, safely, and responsibly is a task we need to start teaching children earlier than ever. "As kids explore social networking sites such as Club Penguin or KidSwirl, parents must visit these sites with their child and monitor all chats," says Perle. "Make sure you choose from age-appropriate games, since many have sexual or violent content as well as commercial characters embedded in them." By age 7, children begin to understand that commercials try to get them to want to buy things—so talk about how to be a smart media consumer.

Like all parents, Dr. Rich is doing his best to stay on top of his sons' digital exploits. Recently, he reports, Ian took a picture of his mom sleeping and installed it as the wallpaper on his dad's iPhone. "Now this one's a keeper," he says.

Unplug yourself

Is the TV always on, even when no one is watching? Do you take your smartphone to the dinner table? You don't have to go cold turkey; just set a good example by limiting your tech time and using those free moments to be with your family.

Fire the electronic babysitter

Don't flip a switch whenever the kids are bored or you need a break.

Develop healthy media habits early

Just because your kid can play with your iPad for hours doesn't mean he should. For toddlers and preschoolers, 20 to 30 minutes of screen time twice a day (all screens, not just TV) is plenty, says Dr. Michael Rich.

(Source: parents.com)

SIMAC can help combat land grabbing: minister

TECHNOLOGY TEHRAN — Iran's Real Estate Integrated Suite (with Persian acronym of SIMAC) has a crucial role in combating land grabbing, the communication and information technology minister has said.

Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi said that through SIMAC, services are provided for people in unique suite and it can combat land grabbing, IRNA reported on April 18.

He named SIMAC project as one of the achievements of e-government attained in the past Iranian calendar year 1396 (ended on March 20).

"E-government leads to transparency and combating economic rent," he said.

He also pointed cellphone registration scheme as another plan which was possible through e-government.

According to the scheme cellphone users in Iran shall resume the registration process based on the country's telecommunications database to stop growing market for smuggled cellphones.

Collaboration between the ministry of Communication and Information Technology,



the Ministry of Industry, Mining and Trade, and the Customs Administration led to a decrease in cellphone smuggling, he said.

Azari Jahromi announced that the scheme brought 12 billion rials (about \$285 million) in revenues for the government.

E-government: Where does Iran stand worldwide?

As per the United Nations 2016 E-Government Development Index, out of 193 countries worldwide Iran ranks 106 in putting in place e-government initiatives and information and communication technologies applications for the people to further enhance public sector efficiencies and streamline governance systems to support sustainable development.

On a scale of zero to one the United Kingdom tops the list with an index of 0.9193 followed by Australia, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Denmark and France. With an index of 0.4649 Iran stands somewhere in the middle of the chart.

The country has had a minus four rank change compared to the year 2010.

The data which is available from the year 2003 indicates that Iran has had its ups and downs and ranked 98 (its highest ever rank over the aforesaid period) in 2005.

'Startups play great role in energy ecosystem'



TECHNOLOGY TEHRAN — Startups and technology accelerators play a great role in energy ecosystem, Sirus Vatankhah, an official with the vice president's office for science and technology affairs has said.

He called the field of energy very critical in sustainable development of the country, Mehr reported.

Unfortunately, optimization of energy consumption is not satisfactory neither in supply nor in demand, he said during Energy

Startup Day, which was held on Saturday. The official lamented the absence of startups in the field of energy supply and demand as well as transportation.

He pointed to technological development in the field of optimization of energy consumption, which can make crucial changes in marketing.

"About 20 percent of energy loss belongs to residential buildings, which can be reduced by offering technological solutions to citizens," he said.

University of Tehran supports banking, insurance startups



TECHNOLOGY TEHRAN — The science and technology park of University of Tehran supports startups and welcomes novel ideas in the field of banking and insurance, said Abbas Zarei, head of the science and technology park.

Financial technology (fintech) is not limited to digitalization and IT, he said during the closing ceremony of Iran's Finstars 2018 on April 19 in Tehran.

He went on to say that marketing clinic

and chamber of investment at the park provide services to transform ideas into business, Mehr reported.

"Marketing clinic helps startup owners to attract investment more easily," he noted.

Finstars, the leading fintech startup event in Iran, is a series of financial events that brings together fintech startups and fintech experts to meet Iran's technological needs of the financial markets and share innovative ideas on fintech.

How can I store my digital photos forever?

Nothing lasts forever, and digital images can disappear in seconds. People lose their most important photos every day when hard drives fail, when smartphones and laptops are stolen, when online services shut down, and when natural disasters strike. Fires, floods and earthquakes can also destroy digital records.

To be really safe, you should have more than one copy of each photo, stored in more than one way in more than one place.

Digital data is a particular problem because storage formats change all the time. I still have data on 8in, 5.25in and 3.5in floppy disks, Iomega Zip disks and quarter-inch tapes. The photos might be safe but I won't know unless I buy something that can read them.

Operating systems, software and file formats also keep changing, so being able to see a file doesn't mean you can load it. Happily, the standard .jpg/jpeg picture file format developed by the Joint Photographic Experts Group may well last "forever" despite efforts to replace it with JPEG 2000, PNG (Portable Network Graphics), SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics), SPIFF (Still Picture Interchange File Format), BPG (Better Portable Graphics), FLIF (Free Lossless Image Format), HEIF (High Efficiency Image Format, aka HEIC in Apple's iOS 11), and Google's WebP, among others.

Making digital documents last forever therefore involves two processes. First, you have to keep moving the data to new storage systems before the old one fails or becomes unreadable. Second, you may have to keep converting documents to whichever file format becomes dominant before the old one is abandoned.

Disk drives

The one thing we know about hard drives is that most of them fail sooner rather than later. Recently, I had a 1TB PC hard drive fail after four years, and a 2TB external USB hard drive failed after seven years. Some drives fail after a few months while others work for a decade or more. There is no way of knowing. However, it's a good rule of thumb that a drive is increasingly likely to fail after five years or 50,000 hours of use. If you want to keep photos for 50 years, you might have to store them on roughly 10 hard drives in all.

Because a hard drive can fail at any time, it's not enough to store your photos on a single drive. Two hard drives is a usable minimum, but I have my photos on at least three: my desktop PC, the external USB hard drive that backs up my PC, and an 8TB drive that backs up three external hard drives.

Hard drives are good for storing photos because they are cheap, they provide fast access to data, and it's very easy to copy a whole hard drive to another hard drive — especially if you have USB 3.0 or Thunderbolt connections.

However, backup drives have their limitations. First, your data is vulnerable both to human error and to malicious software. Second, your data is at risk of being stolen or destroyed by fire, flood or some other disaster.

If your external hard drive is always plugged into your PC, then you can delete whole folders by accident, or by making errors when copying files. If your PC is infected by malware such as ransomware, it will usually encrypt files



on external hard drives as well. If a burglar steals your PC, they may take the backup drive as well, and if your house burns down, you'll also lose both.

You should therefore keep a backup "off-site" in the office, or at a friend or relative's house, or perhaps sealed in a moisture-proof box in a garage or shed.

Optical discs

Because of the risks to hard drives, it's a good idea to keep backups on removable storage media as well. The current options include CD-R, DVD and Blu-ray optical discs. With optical drives, you should use high-quality discs and store them in a cool, dark and dry place.

Photos on write-once optical discs cannot be deleted by accident, cannot be encrypted or infected by malware, and are unlikely to be stolen. Because they are portable, you can easily store copies off-site.

Unfortunately, a CD only stores 702MB of data, which is great for 100k texts but not so good for 5MB image files. A DVD can store 4.7GB, which is practical for many projects but isn't big enough for a significant photo collection. For example, you can probably fit all the photos from a wedding or a holiday on one DVD, but maybe not a whole year.

Blu-ray discs can store a lot of data: 25GB on single-layer discs and 50GB on the dual-layer discs used to distribute movies. (Triple- and quad-layer discs are also available.) You can probably fit your whole photo collection on a few dual-layer Blu-ray discs, and 20 will hold a terabyte.

USB thumbdrives and SD memory cards are not suitable for long-term archival storage because the charge decays over long periods. Ideally, they should be refreshed every four or five years. You can do that by running the Windows checkdisk command.

Cloud storage

Storing photos "in the cloud" — basically, on someone else's collection of hard drives — solves all the problems of using local hard drives and of transferring data to new

physical media. But it is important to remember that data in the cloud is not safe and not under your control.

The biggest risks with cloud storage are being locked out of your account, being hacked by someone who deletes all your stuff, and by your account being closed if you don't pay any charges required. Of course, online storage services may also shut down or go bust, and in one case — Megaupload — the servers were seized by the US Justice Department.

Many large companies offer photo storage services including Amazon, Google, Microsoft (OneDrive), and Apple (iCloud). However, these can be expensive if you need a lot of storage, and your photos will not be as accessible as they are on a local hard drive. Before you commit to making some large uploads, check how easy it is to download files, and whether file-names, sizes and Exif data are preserved.

Flickr offers a terabyte of free photo storage space, with adverts, though it is not as attractive as it used to be. SmugMug is a good alternative and provides unlimited storage for \$47.88 a year, after a 14-day free trial period. Microsoft offers a terabyte per user with Office 365, with Personal (one user) priced at £59.99 a year and Home (five users) at £79.99. Amazon offers unlimited photo storage if you pay £79 a year for Prime membership.

Be careful of services that don't preserve your original photos exactly as you uploaded them. Google charges £7.99/\$9.99 per month to store a terabyte of photos at their original quality, but will store them free at a reduced (16MP) resolution that it, correctly, calls High Quality. Facebook's photo storage is free but it reduces images from printable quality to web-viewing quality.

There are many alternatives, but the largest players — Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft — are most likely to be around in the long term. Of course, prices and terms may change, and if you store photos for 50 or 100 years, the cost adds up.

(Source: theguardian.com)

Scientists find source of supervolcano's heat

A giant volcano lies beneath Yellowstone National Park and the heat it generates powers all the hot springs and geysers in the area, but where does this heat come from?

Scientists describe Yellowstone as a hotspot marked by anomalously high temperature. The intense heat produced by this hotspot is responsible for the melting of the crust and the formation of basaltic and rhyolitic magma.

The Yellowstone hotspot is fixed within the Earth's mantle and has long been suspected to be part of a mantle plume, an upwelling of abnormally hot rock within the Earth's mantle. Mantle plumes may originate from the boundary separating the mantle and the core about 1,850 miles beneath the surface.

To find evidence of a plume beneath the Yellowstone, Study researchers Peter Nelson and Stephen Grand, from the University of Texas, used seismic tomography, a technique for imaging Earth's subsurface using seismic waves produced by earthquakes or explosions. The data provided evidence for plume extending from the core-mantle boundary all the way to the base of the crust at Yellowstone.

Whole-mantle plume

The "model reveals a single narrow,



cylindrically shaped slow anomaly, approximately 350 km in diameter that we interpret as a whole-mantle plume. The anomaly is tilted to the northeast and extends from the core-mantle boundary to the surficial position of the Yellowstone hotspot," the researchers wrote

in their study, which was published in Nature Geoscience in March. "Our results strongly support a deep origin for the Yellowstone hotspot."

Yellowstone erupts about every 600,000 years and its next eruption could be catastrophic.

A group of NASA scientists and engineers earlier revealed the idea of stealing the volcano's heat to prevent an eruption.

If more heat could be extracted, the volcano may not erupt. NASA estimates that cooling the volcano on its brink of an eruption by 35 percent could ward off an explosion.

The circulating water

The idea is to drill a hole into the side of the volcano and pump water through it. The circulating water would come back out heated to over 600 degrees, which, given enough time, could slowly take enough heat from the volcano and prevent an explosion.

"You would have to give the geothermal companies incentives to drill somewhat deeper and use hotter water than they usually would," said Brian Wilcox of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

The "long-term benefit is that you prevent a future supervolcano eruption which would devastate humanity."

Scientists, however, acknowledged that this idea of saving Earth from a supervolcanic eruption is far from perfect.

(Source: Tech Times)

Long-term study reveals flip in plant responses to carbon dioxide

Not all plants fix carbon from the atmosphere in the same way. More than 90 percent of plants use what's known as C3 carbon fixation; others such as maize and sugarcane use a variation on the process known as C4 carbon fixation. Based on their biology, C4 plants have long been thought to be less responsive than C3 plants to changes in carbon dioxide concentration — an important difference to take into account when studying how plants may influence future climate change.

But a report published on April 20 in Science is now calling that thinking into question with results that suggest that, over long timescales, the opposite may be true. "These findings challenge the current (C3-C4) paradigm" about carbon dioxide concentrations, the researchers write in their paper, "and show that even the best-supported short-term drivers of plant response to global change might not predict long-term results."

C3 and C4 plants respond differently to changing carbon dioxide concentrations thanks to differences in the molecular pathways they use to capture the gas from the atmosphere.

While C3 plants use an enzyme known as RuBisCO to fix carbon into a 3-carbon compound, C4 plants — many of them grasses and important crop plants — use a different enzyme to produce a 4-carbon compound first.

Carbon dioxide molecules

The C4 plants' enzyme has a much higher affinity for carbon dioxide molecules, leading researchers to hypothesize that these plants will gain less from increasing carbon dioxide concentrations than their C3 cousins.

Many experiments have provided support for this hypothesis—and the first 12 years' worth of data from this latest experiment, carried out in Minnesota, was no different. Over that period, C3 plants being grown in elevated carbon dioxide levels had an average biomass increase of 20 percent compared to control plants being grown in ambient conditions, while C4 plants showed just a 1 percent gain compared to their ambient-grown counterparts.

But then the tables turned. Over the next eight years of the experiment, the C4 plants gained 24 percent more biomass than their ambient-grown counterparts, while C3

plants instead averaged around 2 percent less.

Fluctuated in harmony

The researchers don't know what's behind the change in trend, although they note in their paper that the levels of available nitrogen in the soil fluctuated in harmony with growth rates for each of the two plants, suggesting something in the nitrogen-fixing microbial community might be involved.

All the same, the findings are a "huge surprise," study coauthor Peter Reich, an ecologist at the University of Minnesota in Saint Paul, tells Nature. "I don't think any scientist in the world would have predicted it."

The study holds relevance for climate models, which include estimates of plants' capacity to take up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The new findings suggest while C3 plants might contribute less to soaking up carbon dioxide than previously anticipated, C4 grasslands could contribute more. The "main message is don't count out the C4 grasslands," Dana Blumenthal, an ecologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Fort Collins, Colorado, tells Nature.

(Source: The Scientist)

Effects of weed on the teen brain might be 'overstated,' study says

How marijuana affects the brain has long been debated. While previous studies determined it's detrimental to the development of teenage brains, a new study suggests the negative long-term impacts of weed might be minimal.

In the new study, researchers set out to better understand the possible risk of frequent cannabis use and cognitive function among teenagers and young adults. Their research, which was sparked by the shifting cultural

views and policy changes surrounding the drug, found that cognitive effects exist, but may not last long.

The meta-analysis, published in JAMA Psychiatry, analyzed data from 69 previous studies, authored between 1973 and 2017 that focus on heavy recreational marijuana use and cognitive function in more than 2,000 young people, a majority of whom were male. An additional 6,500 participants who were

non-users were also included in the research as comparison participants.

They found that participants who said they were heavy marijuana users were more likely to have lower scores than non-users on a number of cognitive domains including attention, speed of information processing and delayed memory.

However, they also found that heavy users who laid off weed for about 72 hours had a cognitive effect that faded.

"That was the biggest surprise," J. Cobb Scott, assistant professor of psychiatry at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, told TIME. "There is biological plausibility that cannabis could cause changes in the brain that is still developing. But the abstinence data we have indicates that while those effects are detectable, they seem to go away after more than three days of abstinence."

(Source: Newsweek)

BSI holds 1st Top 500 Clients' Seminar: CEO

In an unprecedented move, Bank Saderat Iran (BSI) organized 1st Top 500 Customers of the Bank, the Public Relations Dept. of the bank reported.

For his part, Chief Executive of Bank Saderat Iran (BSI) Dr. Hojjatollah Seyyedi expounded on the future programs and objectives of the bank in order to support various industrial and economic sectors of

the country.

Honoring clientele and lauding loyalty of customers has been cited as the main objective of the bank in launching this prestigious Seminar, he said, adding, "this prestigious event was held at the venue of Tehran's Esteghlal Hotel in the presence of CEO of Bank Saderat Iran, members of the Board of Directors, deputies, director



generals, managers of branches of the provinces, etc., based on which, top customers of the bank were appreciated."

Dr. Hojjatollah Seyyedi CEO of the bank thanked customers and clients of the bank such as industrialists and managers of holding companies in various oil, gas, petrochemical sectors, etc. and exchanged views with them on the relevant issues.

Europe eye broadening economic and banking coop. with Iran: EDBI CEO

Chief Executive of Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI) Seyyed Kamal Seyyed Ali said that Europe is interested in enhancing economic and banking cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Public Relations Dept. of the bank reported.

He pointed to the banking and trade relations between Iran and Europe and said, "after the implementation of Iran's nuclear deal dubbed 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), giant steps were taken between Iran and Europe in international level in a way that Iran managed to enhance its ties with the outside world decisively."

European countries think that as long as US behavior is not changed with regard to JCPOA, they [European countries] will not change its behavior, he said, adding, "under such circumstances, European countries are fear of being punished by the US government in case of violation



of sanctions regime."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Seyyed Ali pointed to signing and sealing finance contract in post-sanctions era with countries including China and Russia and added, "We managed to ink separate deals with these two countries

within the framework of finance contract."

It seems that Islamic Republic of Iran can take effective steps in this regard using branch offices of domestic banks especially in the field of opening account."

European governments and banks are interested in broadening economic and banking relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran, he said and put the number of European envoys in Iran at more than 20.

He put trade volume exchanged between Iran and European countries in sanctions period at about \$200 billion and added, "of total trade volume, 100 billion dollars of which is related to oil sale."

Any type of investment and economic activity strictly depends on the social security, he said, adding, "Iran and Europe Business Forum will be held in Tehran's Espinas Palace Hotel on April 28-29."

Giant steps taken in copper industry: Parliament's Economic Commission Chief

Head of Economic Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iranian Parliament also called Majlis) Mohammad-Reza Pour-Ebrahimi said that effective steps have been taken in the copper sector of the country.

Speaking in the inaugural ceremony of 60,000-ton Ferrochrome Production Plant in Rafsanjan, he said, "National Iranian Copper Industries Company (NICICO) has taken effective steps in the field of boosting copper production in the country."

He expressed his special thanks to Eng. Baniasadi CEO of the National Iranian Copper Industries Company and also Eng. Mohammadi Member of the Board of Directors of the company and said, "copper capacities of Kerman Province should be used optimal-

ly in line with generation of employment opportunities."

With due observance to the said issue, it seems that removal of pollution in Sarcheshmeh Copper Production Company with the operation of an acid factory by the end of the current year in 1397 (to end March 20, 2019), accelerating copper mines and mineral development projects of Kerman Province with the aim of increasing concentrate production in the company, producing cathode in the company as much as its nominal capacity in Khatoonabad and Sarcheshmeh smelting factories and generating employment through activation of small copper mines, etc. have been put atop agenda of the managing director and members of the Board of Directors of the company, the issue of which



has been taken into serious consideration.

Accordingly, chief executive of the National Iranian Copper Industries Company (NICICO) visited Rafsanjan Special Economic Zone.

Synergy of developmental activities of copper industry in cooperation with

subsidiary companies with the approach of attraction of investment of private sector and foreign companies in this zone, moreover supplying and focusing on materialization of objectives of resistance economy, can play a decisive role in generation of employment for job-seeking people of Kerman province."

Seyyed Hojjatollah Mousavi Chief Executive of Copper Pension Fund was the next speaker who expressed his special thanks to the CEO of NICICO due to prioritizing the Fund and its affiliated companies and added, "over the previous year, we have tried to set up consolidation between affiliated and subsidiary companies for the development of activities related to the copper industry in Kerman Province."

Meteor diamonds confirm protoplanets once existed in our Solar System

One problem with researching the formation of the solar system is finding material that's existed for more than four billion years. Much of our understanding of this time period comes from studying asteroids and the meteors that fall to Earth.



On this planet, plate tectonics and surface weathering have destroyed, sunk, or remodeled most of the rock that constituted Earth's crust during the Hadean period. But there are asteroids still floating in space that formed in the earliest days of our solar system — and every now and then, one of them crashes to Earth.

In 2008, one such asteroid, Asteroid 2008 TC3 landed in the Nubian Desert. Unlike most meteorites, which are classified as chondrites — a type of primitive, non-metallic, stony asteroid — 2008 TC3 is a rare type of asteroid known as a ureilite.

Ureilites contain mostly olivine and pyroxene as well as nanodiamonds, which are believed to form when the rocks are exposed to high pressure and stress, most likely when their parent bodies collide with other asteroids. But the same characteristics that give diamond its strength also allow the formation process to trap other minerals inside the diamond when it forms. By studying the materials inside these nanodiamonds, scientists can peer back in time to an era when the planets within the Solar System were still forming from the sun's protoplanetary disk.

Our current theory of planetary evolution holds that in the beginning, a gas cloud of molecular hydrogen condenses into a protostar, while grains of ice and dust within the protoplanetary disk slowly accrete together, forming what are called planetesimals. Eventually, the planetesimals become large enough to form protoplanets, sometimes called planetary embryos. Ceres, 2 Pallas, and 4 Vesta are all protoplanets that survived the formation of the solar system. Of the three, only Ceres is rounded by its own gravity, but both Vesta and Ceres have a differentiated interior — another mark of a protoplanet. Pallas is thought to have a partially differentiated interior.

(Source: extremetech.com)

Far-red fluorescent silk can kill harmful bacteria as biomedical and environmental remedy

A silk hybrid material attacks bacteria when illuminated by a green light, thanks to a far-red fluorescent protein researchers transferred to its genetic makeup.



The all-natural material would be safer than conventional photocatalytic, or light-activated, means to kill harmful pathogens such as bacteria, which use potentially biohazardous semiconductors and require cancer-causing ultraviolet light for activation. A silk alternative engineered by Purdue University and the Korean National Institute of Agricultural Research would instead use plasmonic photocatalyst-like biomaterials and visible light, which also aid in wound healing and environmental remediation including air and water purification. Their findings published in early view on March 12 in Advanced Science.

"Silk is an ancient and well-known biomaterial," said Young Kim, Purdue associate professor of biomedical engineering. "It doesn't have any issues with the human body. And the nice thing about green light is that it's not harmful — the color corresponds to the strongest intensity of the solar spectrum."

Far-red fluorescent protein

To combine the benefits of silk and green light, researchers inserted the gene for "mKate2," a far-red fluorescent protein, into a silk host. Shining a green light on the resulting hybrid generates reactive oxygen species (ROS), which are effective radicals for breaking down organic contaminants and attacking the membrane and DNA of pathogens.

When E. coli on the fluorescent silk were illuminated by a weak green light for 60 minutes, the bacteria's survival rate dropped to 45 percent.

The researchers found that the hybrid could be processed into a solution, film, bandage and fabric. "We've basically added fluorescence to silk to facilitate disinfection or decontamination using just visible light," said Jung Woo Leem, a visiting scholar in Purdue's school of biomedical engineering.

Kim's team believes that green-light activated red fluorescent silk could be both more efficient and scalable than other plasmonic photocatalysts, in which metal nanoparticles hybridized from semiconductor materials also use visible light but could still pose negative environmental consequences.

The "silk photocatalysts would be easier and safer to produce than plasmonic ones since silkworms, rather than industrial facilities, provide the host for ROS-generating materials. It's a completely new green manufacturing of nanomaterials," Kim said.

(Source: eurekalert.org)

Rouhani urged to investigate case of detained environmentalists

SOCIETY TEHRAN — More than 700 Iranian celebrities and environmentalists have signed a letter calling on President Hassan Rouhani to legally shed light on the case of 13 environmental activists arrested on espionage charges some 90 days ago.

“As you know the environmental activists have been jailed for about 90 days and there are no exact information available on their charges,” the letter writes.

While some of the detained environmentalist have made phone calls or visited their families at least once, some others have not contacted their families yet, the letter states.

It goes on to say that not having any contacts with the outside world as well as not having access to a private defense attorney or even a court-appointed lawyer is a violation of human rights charter.



“Iranian environmentalists have always done their best to inform the people about detrimental effects of climate change, water shortage biodiversity loss among other environmental predicaments which entails contacting foreign experts, professors and NGOs, utilizing equipment such as camera trap, and raising funds from international entities, it is surprising to count such activities as a crime.”

“Though it is crystal clear that national security has priority over everything else and undermining it must be punished but casting doubt on environmental activities and detaining environmentalists without giving convincing and logical explanations would cause frustration among environmentalists.”

Seyed Emami, one of the founders of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation and a sociology professor at Imam Sadiq University, and six of his associates were arrested by intelligence services in early February on allegations of spying. The other six conservationists, who are all well-known for their work in wildlife conservation, are still in prison.

Abbas Jafari-Dolatabadi, Tehran’s prosecutor general, said Seyed-Emami, was accused of espionage and committed suicide after confessing his crimes while in prison.

Later some 7 other environmentalist were arrested on the same charges.

The then deputy chief of the Department of Environment Kaveh Madani was also detained for a short time back in February. Madani who had left his position at Imperial College London to serve as a deputy for international affairs, innovation and socio-cultural engagement of the Department of Environment resigned in late April.

LEARN ENGLISH

Going To The Tailor

A: Welcome to Bill’s Fabric World. What can I do for you today?

B: I was wondering if you guys also tailor clothes.

A: Sure we do! We have the best tailors in the country! What is it that you need exactly?

B: Well, I’m looking to get a **custom-made** suit.

A: Excellent! We have the finest cashmeres at affordable prices. How about we get you measured? Let’s **start off** by measuring the width of your shoulders. Now, let’s **measure** the length of your arms and this bit around your neck here.

B: Can you **make sure** you leave a little extra space in the collar? My neck gets easily irritated.

A: No problem! Now for your pants, let me just measure your waist and the inseam.

B: You might also want to leave a little extra room in the waist area. I **tend** to gain a few pounds over the holidays.

A: OK. Now you can pick your fabric and **pattern design**. Please follow me.

Key vocabulary

custom-made: made especially for the needs of one person

measure: to ascertain the dimensions, quantity

make sure: be sure

tend: be more likely

pattern design: an artistic or decorative design that repeats

Supplementary vocabulary

vest: a garment covering the upper body that has no sleeves

tuxedo: a complete formal outfit, usually black that includes pants, jacket and bow tie

bow tie: a short necktie fashioned into a bowknot close to the throat

cufflinks: a fastening for a shirt cuff usually consisting of two buttons or button-like parts connected with a chain or shank that passes through two slits in the cuff

cummerbund: a broad waist sash, usually pleated, which is often worn with single-breasted dinner jackets

(Source: irlanguage.com)



Without water, everything withers

Iran may approve regulation to curb plastic bags consumption

ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — The Iranian administration will take the final decision by late June on approving a previously drafted regulations which aim to decrease the use of plastic bags in the country, an official with the Department of Environment has said.

Levy tax on the use of plastic bags, promoting awareness towards harms of plastic, and manufacturing recyclable plastic bags are among the main subjects of this regulations, ISNA quoted Ali Moridi as saying on Sunday.

“Currently we are discussing the issue with the ministry of industry. Since this regulations affects the production and consumption of plastics, there is resistance against its implementation.”

Although there is no detailed data on the consumption rate of plastics in the country, it is evident that this consumption trend is way higher than that of advanced countries, he lamented.

Unfortunately, plastic bags are offered free of charge in Iran’s supermarkets while this is not the case in some other countries, he said, adding that putting extra charge on plastic bags will act as a deterrent and encourages citizens to use reusable cloth bags.

Mentioning International Mother Earth Day, April 22, he went on to say that “End Plastic Pollution” has been considered as the year’s global theme for the occasion.

The aim of defining themes is to raise public awareness towards environmental challenges and prepare the ground to fight them, he added.

Plastic needs a significantly long period



to decompose and accordingly various environmental threats are imposed by them, he highlighted, adding that the most known threat happens in oceans and seas where birds and fishes may eat plastic particles which leads to their death.

Moridi went on to say that since there is an excessive consumption of plastics in Iran, the Department of Environment announced ‘no to plastic bags’ as the national theme of this year’s International Mother Earth Day.

Also, plastic bottles and disposable ta-

bleware have a high rate of consumption in the country and have a significant role in polluting the environment, he concluded.

The need for waste separation at source

If domestic waste is separated at source, no plastic will enter the environment, Sadreddin Alipour, the head of the center for environmental management and sustainable development of Tehran Municipality, has said.

Currently waste separation is being im-

plemented in two districts of Tehran, he said, adding that Tehran lacks the required infrastructure for waste separation like installing different recycle bins for every type of waste.

While it is always recommended to use less plastic bags or products, it is a fact that today’s lifestyle cannot remove them completely over a night. However, the important step after using plastics is to separate them at source – along other materials like glass and metals – to facilitate their recycling process.

Wetlands destruction, the main threat to curlews

ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — Destruction of wetlands, especially in Asia, is the main threat to curlews’ lives, said director general for aquatic wildlife office of the Department of Environment.

He made the remarks on the occasion of dedicating April 21st to World Curlew Day for the first time.

There are 8 species of curlew in the world, 4 of which have been observed and reported in Iran, IRIB quoted Majid Kharrazian-Moqaddam as saying on Saturday.

Whimbrel, Slender-billed, Eurasian, and Far Eastern curlews are the four identified species which migrate to the country in winters, he highlighted.

Touching on the fact that Far Eastern curlew is classified as Endangered on the International Union for Conservation



Far Eastern curlew

of Nature (IUCN) Red List, he said that this species’ population has decreased by 80 percent during last 3 decades.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Curlew is any of numerous medium-sized or large shorebirds belonging to the genus Numenius (family Scolopacidae) and having a bill that is decurved, or sickle-shaped, curving downward at the tip.

There are eight species. Curlews are streaked, gray or brown birds with long necks and fairly long legs. They breed inland in temperate and sub-Arctic regions of the Northern Hemisphere and migrate far south. During migration, they frequent dry uplands, where they feed on insects and seeds; wintering birds occupy marshes and coastal mud flats, where they probe for worms and fiddler crabs.

Things are changing: “Wet gets wetter, dry gets drier”

1 → This is commonly called “wet gets wetter, dry gets drier.” And the second shift is a change in storm tracks, which should move away from the equator and toward the poles as atmospheric circulation changes.

While the study also highlights that El Niño generally makes wet regions wetter and dry regions drier it also contracts storm tracks toward the equator. That’s the opposite of what would happen due to climate change.

It may not be conclusive to claim that whatever is happening in Iran, in this case getting drier, is only because of climate change. Finding it out is not within reach without conducting a large-scale, in-depth survey, but it is safe to have a premonition about the future: things are changing, it is getting warmer, and it is raining less, hence it is getting drier.

Precipitation amounts

Since the beginning of the past water year starting on September 23 up to April 11 precipitation volume was some 170 billion cubic meters which increased to some 181 billion cubic meters following recent rainfalls and snowfalls in almost thirteen provinces.

According to Tasnim news agency, the volume of the country’s precipitation over the same period a year before that (September



A woman is carrying a gallon of water on her head taken from a well located outside a village in the southwestern province of Kerman in May 2017. People in drought-stricken areas should sometimes walk a fairly long distance to obtain potable water for everyday use.

2016 to March 2017) was some 330 billion cubic meters which indicates a 46 percent year on year drop.

“Precipitation amounts have dropped by 40 percent compared to long-term averages and taking temperature rise into account, we are currently setting the record for the driest water year,” head of the national drought center has said.

Decreased precipitation along with temperature rise are exacerbating the situation. “we should wish for a miracle” to find a way out of this undesirable conditions, Mehr quoted Sadeq Rezaeian as saying on Sunday.

Head of the national meteorological organization Davoud Parhizkar has also said that the water year 2007-2008 with

41 percent drop in precipitation levels had set the record high for the driest year over the past 30 years, however, the upcoming years may break that record.

As per the data pertaining to the latest 2016 census available on the official website of the presidential directorate for rural and underprivileged areas development, some 74 percent of the whole country’s population are living in urban areas which was quite the reverse in 1956 when 68 percent of the population were residing rural regions.

It is not so far-fetched to consider drought spells as one of the main factors forcing many people to leave their lives in villages and migrate to urban areas over the past 30 years.

It is highly crucial to make different decisions now, the current condition requires different strategies, they might sound harsh, but what can we do except for bowing before the mother Earth and modify our lifestyles. What goes around comes around. This is what we have brought upon ourselves over the past 150 years and now we cannot change it, the earth is getting warmer, the drier parts are getting drier and the wet parts are getting wetter. We should soon adapt ourselves to these changes or life will get pretty much harder.

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

No intercity bus crashes occur during holidays

Nary had an intercity bus crash occurred during the two-week Iranian New Year [starting on March 21] holidays, Traffic Police Chief Mohammad-Hossein Hamidi has said.

For the first time over the past few years no fatal intercity bus crashes have taken place during the holidays, Fars news agency quoted Hamidi as saying. Thanks to a scheme for online monitoring of intercity buses, also known as SEPAHTAN (the Persian acronym for the project), the number of crashes decreased to none at all.

The number of buses plying intercity roads has increased four times over the past 10 years, Hamidi said, stating, with 16,000 buses the number of fatalities has decreased from 543 individuals per year to less than 200 individuals over the corresponding period.

حادثه اتوبوسی منجر به فوت در نوروز نداشتیم

محمدحسین حمیدی رئیس پلیس راه اهور ناجا گفت: هیچ حادثه اتوبوسی در نوروز امسال نداشته‌ایم. به گزارش خبرگزاری فارس حمیدی گفت: برای نخستین بار طی چند سال گذشته، حادثه اتوبوسی منجر به فوت در نوروز نداشتیم.

سردار حمیدی با اشاره به سامانه سپهتن (سامانه نظارت و پایش تردد ناوگان حمل و نقل عمومی) بر روی اتوبوس‌ها راه اندازی شد گفت: سامانه سپهتن، تخلفات اتوبوس‌ها و متعاقب آن، تصادفات اتوبوس‌ها را در نوروز به صفر کاهش داد.

وی با اشاره به این که شمار اتوبوس‌ها در کشور از ۴ هزار دستگاه در سال ۸۶ به ۱۶ هزار دستگاه در سال ۹۶ رسیده است افزود: این در حالیست که با اقدامات کنترلی پلیس و بکارگیری تجهیزات الکترونیکی توانستیم شمار کشته‌های این وسایل نقلیه را از ۵۴۳ نفر در سال ۸۶ به زیر ۲۰۰ نفر در سال ۹۶ کاهش دهیم.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“endo-”

Meaning: inside

For example: **Endoscopy** allows physicians to peer through the body’s passageways.

PHRASAL VERB

Get off (something)

Meaning: to finish work and leave the place where you work at the end of the day

For example: I usually get off at six o’clock.

IDIOM

All brawn and no brain

Explanation: someone who is physically very strong but not very intelligent

For example: He’s an impressive player to watch, but he’s all brawn and no brain.

Carnage in Kabul

Scores killed and injured in attacks on voter registration centers in Afghanistan

Bomb attacks at voter registration centers in the Afghan capital, Kabul, and in Baghlan province have killed at least 54 people and wounded more than a hundred others, health officials said at the time of the report.

Kabul's acting police chief, Mohammad Daoud Amin, said an assailant detonated his explosives at the doorway of an ID distribution center in the capital on Sunday, killing 48 people.

Later in the day, just north of the city, an explosive was placed near another voting center in Baghlan's Pul-e-Khumri city, killing six people from the same family.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist outfit said it carried out the Kabul attack, but no group has claimed responsibility for the Baghlan blast yet.

The Kabul suicide bombing occurred in the Dasht-e-Barchi area, where many of the country's Shia Hazara minority reside.

A public health ministry official said ambulances evacuated scores of wounded, adding that the death toll may rise.

Among the victims were many women and children, witnesses said.



■ **Convoy of foreign forces kills a child near U.S. embassy in Kabul**
In a separate development on Sunday, a traffic incident reportedly involving a convoy of foreign forces killed a child near the United States embassy in Kabul, prompting protests

in the area. Witnesses reported heavy gunfire near the embassy.

Attacks have multiplied in recent days in advance of the long-delayed parliamentary and district council elections scheduled for October 20 this year.

■ **Afghan president offers to recognize the Taliban**

Elsewhere, voter registration offices opened just last week as part of the long process to get Afghans properly registered for the October polls.

The run-up to the elections has already been plagued by allegations of fraud.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) says it hopes as many as 15 million people will register for the polls, but the election commissioner admits registration turnout so far has been low.

Last week, a voter registration center was attacked in Ghor province, according to Tolonews, a local news website.

In that attack, unidentified gunmen, which a police spokesperson said belonged to the Taliban, kidnapped two police officers on site as well as three IEC workers.

On Thursday, unidentified gunmen killed two policemen guarding a voter registration center in Jalalabad City.

Another policeman was killed on Friday after a voter registration center was attacked in Qala-e-Naw in Baghdis province in central Afghanistan.

(Source: agencies)

Saudi Arabia: A new coup or a chaos for small drone

Heavy gunfire, explosions reported from vicinity of royal palace in Riyadh

1 → Following the footage's circulation, a senior Saudi regime official claimed that the incident occurred when troops opened fire at a toy drone in Khozama district, where royal palaces are located.

A statement was also released via state news which said that troops had spotted a drone and "dealt with it according to their orders."

Security around Saudi royal palaces has been bolstered over the past few months as the Saudi regime inexperienced and ambitious Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) oversees Riyadh's economic overhaul, dubbed Vision 2030.

According to the Saudi regime Interior Ministry, last October an attacker killed two Saudi guards and injured three others at the gate of the royal palace in the Red Sea city of Jeddah.

Security forces killed the gunman, identified as a 28-year-

old Saudi national armed with a Kalashnikov and three grenades.

The House of Saud is inherently weak with no democratic legitimacy and few genuine friends. Its key central purpose is its own survival and that implies above all the need for stability — something that until MBS came on the scene had been the hallmark of the Saudi regime policy for the last century. History suggests that a power grab is not a man oeuvre that produces long-term success; it generates instability. The absence of legitimacy creates a vacuum that challengers will seek to fill.

■ **Saudi drone enthusiasts to require permit after 'palace incident'**

However, authorities in Riyadh have called on drone enthusiasts to register with authorities before operating the aerial devices after a toy drone was reportedly shot down

near the royal palace in the capital.

A spokesperson for the Saudi regime interior ministry said a framework regulating the use of drones was in "its final stages", state-run SPA news agency reported on Sunday.

The official said drone enthusiasts are expected to apply for a permit that would authorize them "to use drones for the purposes assigned to them in permitted sites from police in their neighborhoods".

The spokesman said the measure would be temporary until the issuance of the regulation.

An unnamed senior Saudi regime official told Reuters news agency that King Salman was not in his palace at the time of Saturday's incident.

"The king was at his farm in Diriya," the official said, naming another area of Riyadh.

Armenian opposition leader detained at protest

Armenian opposition leader MP (Member of Parliament) Nikol Pashinyan was detained by police at a protest in the capital Yerevan.

Pashinyan was detained along with several others after authorities dispersed a protest on Sunday. His arrest came after a televised meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan.

Sargsyan walked out of the meeting, where Pashinyan told the prime minister in front of the cameras that he came "to discuss your resignation".

"This is not a dialogue; this is blackmail. I only can advise you to return to a legal framework ... otherwise, you will bear the responsibility," Sargsyan replied.



"You don't understand the situation in Armenia. The power is now in people's hands," Pashinyan said.

Before walking out of the meeting room, Sargsyan said: "A party that scored eight percent in [parliamentary] elections can't speak on behalf of the people."

After the meeting, Pashinyan encouraged his supporters to launch a "velvet revolution" to remove Sargsyan from power.

The protest movement, which has seen thousands of people take to the streets, is largely comprised of a network of self-organizing opposition supporters built by Pashinyan.

Sargsyan was appointed prime minis-

ter this month after serving 10 years as the country's president.

Protesters have called on him to step down, citing corruption and fears of oligarchic, authoritarian rule.

The former president was about to complete his second and final term before Armenia's semi-presidential government was changed to a parliamentary system, giving greater powers to the position of the prime minister, which does not face term limits.

Sargsyan had promised not to assume the role of prime minister, but his majority in parliament appointed him earlier this month.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

Lithuania wants more NATO anti-aircraft missiles to deter Russia

Lithuania wants the United States to bring more defense systems such as long-range Patriot and short-range Avenger missiles to the Baltics where some fear Russia is more powerful in the air.

The country has asked Washington to install the systems more regularly for exercises, arguing NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) needs to know the region well in case of conflict, Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis told Reuters.

"Yes, of course (we are asking)," he said Reuters. "We are talking not only about the Patriots but also other capabilities, such as short-range Avengers, and other systems to create a regional architecture of air defense, because we are not able to do that ourselves."

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, once ruled from Moscow but now part of NATO and the European Union, need Western help despite growing defense budgets due to their

small economies.

Poland was equally alarmed by Moscow's seizure of Crimea in 2014 and is spending more than \$5 billion on buying Patriot missiles from Raytheon Co after a deal in March.

Patriot missile defense interceptors are designed to detect, track and engage unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), cruise missiles and short-range or tactical ballistic missiles.

But the small Baltic countries cannot afford costly military jets or advanced air defenses, making them reliant on the United States and NATO to fill the gap.

From Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea, any aircraft or missiles could reach most of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

■ **Deployment "at any time"**

Karoblis did not expect NATO to increase defenses in the Baltics immediately but he expects the alliance to show

greater commitment at a NATO leaders summit in July to deterring any threat in the Baltics.

One difficulty is that other NATO members face defense gaps after years of better ties with Russia following the end of the Cold War that made such defenses unnecessary.

"We would like to have the permanent deployment of ground missile systems and other capabilities, but we understand that a quite significant part of these capabilities were lost by NATO after the Cold War and it's difficult to rebuild them fast", he said. "We need to ensure that (air defenses) could be deployed (in the Baltics) at any time necessary."

NATO began improving the region's defenses after Russia's Crimea annexation, including putting four multinational battalions of about 1,000 troops to rotate in each Baltic state and Poland.

(Source: Reuters)

Romanian president slams plan to move Israel embassy

A row erupted between Romania's government and President Klaus Iohannis over a proposal to move the country's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to al-Quds (Jerusalem).

The foreign ministry announced that "a process of analysis and evaluation with the aim of transferring the embassy has been launched".

Prime Minister Viorica Dancila of the left-wing Social Democratic Party confirmed on Friday the government had adopted a memorandum on moving the embassy but added that other steps needed to be taken before a final decision.

In December the United States President Donald Trump sparked global controversy by announcing that the United States would move its embassy in Israel to al-Quds (Jerusalem).

Romania would be the first European Union country to follow suit.

■ **President 'not consulted'**

Dancila was more cautious than PSD party (Social Democratic Party/Partidul Social Democrat) chief Liviu Dragnea, who pre-empted any official announcement and told the Antena 3 TV channel that the decision to move the embassy had been taken. Meanwhile Iohannis's office said he had

"not been consulted or informed over this process," adding that in his opinion the decision was "not based on firm, wide-ranging evaluations".

Iohannis, who is from the center-right and has expressed numerous disagreements with the government, pointed to the constitution, under which the president "approves the creation or shutting down" of diplomatic missions.

Emphasizing that Romania's position on the Israeli-Palestinian question "had not changed", Iohannis said: "At this stage a transfer of the embassy would represent

a violation of international law."

"The government's initiative could eventually represent, at the most, the beginning of a process of evaluation... which could only be finalized after the conclusion of peace talks," Iohannis added.

Dancila confirmed on Friday that the government had adopted a memorandum outlining the plans.

According to Romanian media reports, Dancila will make an official trip to Israel next week. Israel's deputy foreign minister Tzipi Hotovely had visited Romania last week.

(Source: AFP)

Dislike Comey, despise Trump

6 → In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are 5.6 million Syrian refugees and as of July 2016 "6.5 million people, including 2.8 million children, displaced within Syria, the biggest internally displaced population in the world."

Neither the United States nor the international community has developed a sufficient policy and response to this catastrophe. People simply seem to be hoping and praying that it soon comes to an end and trying to ensure that the fighting doesn't spill out of Syria's borders.

On Friday, Nikki Haley herself said at the UN that "the United States estimates that Assad has used chemical weapons in the Syrian war at least 50 times. Public estimates are as high as 200."

Furthermore, the UN human rights office counts a number of chemical weapons attacks in Syria in 2017 alone, all during Trump's time in the White House.

Human Rights Watch points out that: "Government forces used at least 13 types of internationally banned cluster munitions in over 400 attacks on opposition-held areas between July 2012 to August 2016, killing and injuring civilians, including children."

So why was an attack over the use of banned weapons so necessary right now, particularly since it was just earlier this month when Trump was saying he wanted to pull our troops out of Syria and since he campaigned on anti-interventionism?

Again, forgive me if I'm not buying this as a purely humanitarian mission focused on protecting the Syrian people from suffering.

This action and its timing stink. It feels like a legitimate crisis is being used as a tool of distraction, and that to me is unspeakably callous.

So, I see no need to pick sides between Comey and Trump. I dislike the former, but I despise the latter.

(Source: The NYT)

Macron's visit will test the Franco-American security partnership

8 → Beyond the recent Franco-British-American strikes in retaliation against Assad's use of chemical weapons, the United States and France must also work together on drawing up a plan for post-ISIS Syria that should include political transition. Trump has signaled unwillingness to commit to a broad stabilization and reconstruction agenda so France could offer to take the lead together with European and Persian Gulf partners to shoulder the financial burden, particularly since they have a clear stake in preventing another migration crisis.



The most pressing task for Macron is the Iran nuclear deal. None of the E3 states (France, Britain, Germany) want to withdraw from the Iran deal, but Trump needs to decide by May 12 if he will re-impose new sanctions against Iran. Trump and his new advisors, John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, seem bent on withdrawing, and Macron is the most likely world leader to salvage the deal—or at least buy some more time. Among the E3, France has been the most willing to push for a tougher framework aimed at satisfying Trump's demands on Iran's ballistic missile program and its destabilizing role in the region, while seeking to preserve the agreement. France's firm stance on Iran and its hard-power edge lends Macron credibility vis-à-vis Trump on this delicate issue.

Of the leaders of the West's great powers, only Macron seems to have cracked the code on captivating Trump.

On trade, Macron's influence over Trump is more uncertain. President Trump has been consistent on very few issues, but he is a lifelong skeptic of free trade. The decision to impose unilateral tariffs on steel and aluminum imports threatens to levy heavy losses on European countries.

■ **U.S.-French trade spat**

The absence of a deep U.S.-French trade spat provides an opportunity for Macron to seek to preserve and expand the temporary exemptions from the U.S. tariff policy through pushing for new U.S.-EU trade agreement. But this will require Macron to drop the French insistence that the EU should only sign trade agreements with countries that respect the Paris climate agreement. He should also engage Trump in a conversation about cooperation against China's unfair trade practices, which are raising concerns on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, the least hopeful point of debate is over climate change. It is unlikely that Trump will budge on the Paris climate agreement, which he withdrew from last June. While Trump has sought to weaken environmental protection at home, Macron has defiantly recommitted France to the Paris agreement and encouraged climate scientists to move to France with his "Make Our Planet Great Again" initiative. The divisions over climate change also highlight the fundamental ideological differences between the two presidents and their respective political bases. They may enjoy one another's company, but Macron and Trump will never see eye to eye on climate-change policy.

The first official state visit by a foreign head of state to a "new" White House usually offers cause for hope. On a personal level, the two leaders' unique relationship, along with Trump's transactional style, certainly gives Macron an opportunity to engage. On some issues — such as Syria, counterterrorism, and trade — there may be limited room for deal making and forging common understanding. But, should Macron fail to bring back tangible results from his trip to Washington, his rapprochement with the American president will increasingly be called into question. While the unique Trump-Macron "bromance" may soon be coming to an end, the Franco-American security partnership will doubtlessly continue.

(Source: nationalinterest.org)

Milan lacked soul, says furious Gattuso

AC Milan coach Gennaro Gattuso has reacted with predictable anger to his team's home defeat to bottom-of-the-table Benevento, saying his side lacked soul.

"Such a performance is unacceptable," he said after Saturday night's 1-0 reverse at San Siro. "I already had a strange feeling in the past days. We are a team who lack a soul: I am the first man responsible. We must change attitude."

"This was not just a loss but will go down in AC Milan's history," added the famously fiery former midfielder. "This is a burning defeat because AC Milan is an historic and prestigious club. Someone has to be responsible for this, and this is me."

"We have to apologise to the fans for this embarrassment. At the first sign of difficulties, the team lose their way."

Big-spending Milan are sixth in Serie A with 54 points but will be knocked out of the Europa League spots if Atalanta beat Torino later on Sunday.

(Source: Reuters)

Kenya's Cheruiyot wins London Marathon as Radcliffe keeps record

Kenya's Vivian Cheruiyot won the 2018 London Marathon but Paula Radcliffe's 'mixed-gender' race world record remained intact.

Cheruiyot, 34, crossed the finish line in an unofficial personal best two hours, 18 minutes and 31 seconds.

That was more than three minutes slower than the 2:15.25 four-time British Olympian Radcliffe ran in 2003.

Mary Keitany and Tirunesh Dibaba had been looking to break Radcliffe's record but both faded.

Olympic 5,000m champion Cheruiyot ran her first marathon in London last year and finished fourth overall before winning in Frankfurt in the autumn. Kenya's Brigid Kosgei (2:20.13) finished second, with Ethiopia's Tadelech Bekele (2:21.30) third.

Keitany had been on course to break Radcliffe's record but eventually finished fifth (2:24:27) having lost the lead she had held from the start with around five miles remaining.

Great Britain's Lily Partridge (2:29:24) claimed a personal best to finish eighth, with team-mate Tracy Barlow (2:32:09) ninth.

Keitany had made her intentions clear before the race by running with male pacemakers in an attempt to overhaul Radcliffe's record.

And everything looked in control through 10km before Keitany began to pull slightly clear of Dibaba at nine and a half miles, half a minute quicker than Radcliffe.

Keitany's problems emerged with around 10 miles to go and she eventually fell 14 seconds behind the world record pace after 18 miles. Dibaba's struggles were even more severe - on a warm day in the capital - as she dropped down to a walking pace at 30km around Canary Wharf.

Cheruiyot moved up into second place and within sight of Keitany through 21 miles before claiming the race lead and pulling away from Keitany.

(Source: BBC)

Neymar walking without crutches

Neymar is walking without crutches once again as the Paris Saint-Germain and Brazil star continues his recovery from a broken foot.

The world's most expensive player suffered the injury in action for PSG on February 25 when they beat Marseille 3-0, the former Barcelona forward given a recovery timeline of three months after then undergoing surgery.

PSG coach Unai Emery had suggested that Neymar will be able to return before the end of the season, though the 26-year-old says he is scheduled for a final examination on May 17, meaning he is unlikely to return to training before that date.

With PSG's last game of the season coming on May 19, it is extremely unlikely he will play again for the Parisians this term. But he is at least making notable progress, as he posted a video on Instagram of himself walking without support, accompanied by a caption that read: "Bye bye crutches, never again."

Neymar's injury is not expected to put his World Cup participation in doubt.

(Source: Goal)

Maria Sharapova says she will never be Serena Williams's friend

Serena Williams leads Maria Sharapova 19-2 in their head-to-head, with the Russian prevailing only at 2004 Wimbledon and WTA Championships. The two don't have a friendly relationship either.

'Serena is intimidating,' the 31-year-old wrote in her book 'Unstoppable: My Life So Far.' In a recent interview, Sharapova openly spoke about what Serena Williams means for her in her career. 'Over the years, many things were said about our relationship and rivalry. We should be celebrated for what we achieved. We have very different backgrounds, but both of us found a way to get to the top. I have much respect for what she did and her ability to keep fighting to have successes,' the five-time Grand Slam winner recognized.

'This is very special. I think we have a professional relationship. It would have been strange if in the book I didn't speak about one of my greatest rivals. There are many autobiographies of tennis players and sometimes the greatest rivals are not mentioned in their book. I think it's very strange.' Asked if they could be friends after their respective careers ended, Sharapova replied: 'I don't think so. I was lucky to make a lot of friends at a young age in my career who are very important for me.'

At the end of the day, we will always be opponents. Since a young age, when we had never played against each other, I was feeling this competitiveness. I wanted to get to that level and show that I can beat her.'

(Source: Tennis World)

'Last Emperor' Iniesta hailed after stunning Copa del Rey showing

Spanish media paid tribute to Barcelona captain Andres Iniesta after he starred in his side's 5-0 thrashing of Sevilla in the Copa del Rey final at the Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid on Saturday night.

Iniesta scored and pulled the strings for Barcelona in a dominant display as they won the tournament for the fourth season running and a record 30th time.

The playmaker confirmed he will make a decision on his future this week and Spanish reports say he will move to a Chinese Super League side.

"Iniesta, don't go!" begged Madrid daily AS on their front page on Sunday, while Marca described Iniesta as "the last emperor," a reference to his potential departure to East Asia.

"How beautiful it is to watch Iniesta play," wrote AS editor Alfredo Relano. "Iniesta took the cup from the king's hands, lifted it up and we all asked ourselves why he is leaving."

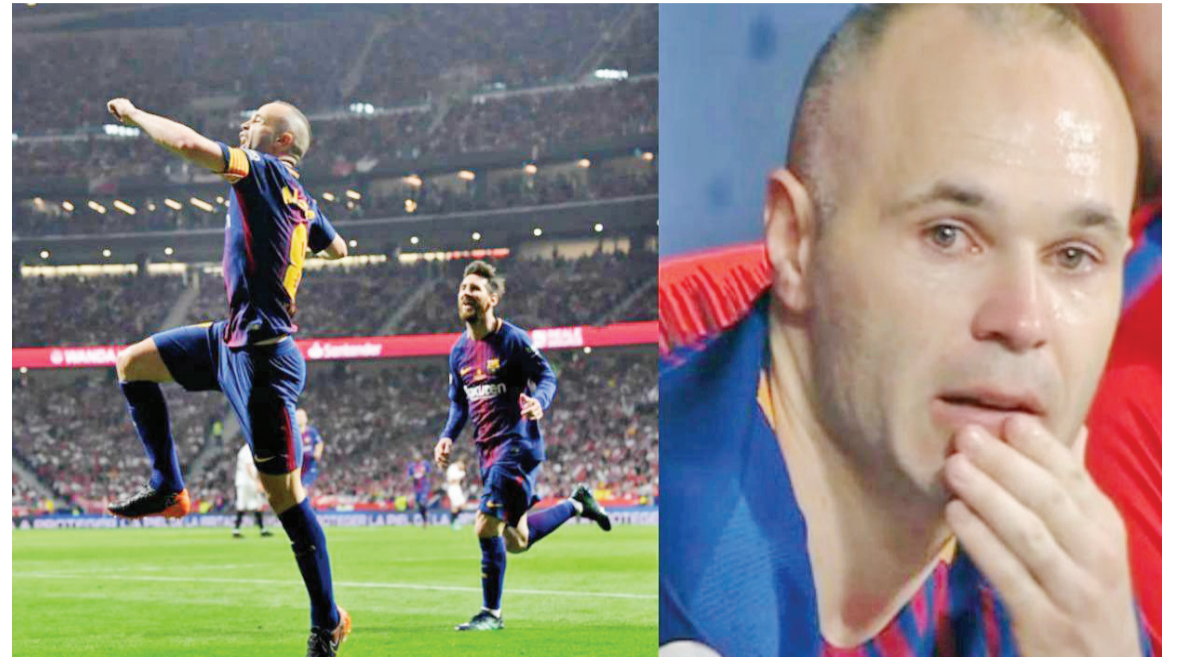
Iniesta, who left the pitch in tears when he was substituted in the 88th minute, was cheered by both sets of fans, who chanted his name.

Iniesta's 2010 World Cup triumph with Spain made him loved across the country and with Barcelona he has won six Copa del Rey medals, four Champions League trophies and eight La Liga titles, which will become nine if his side earn three more points from their last five games in Spain's top flight.

The Barcelona media were just as effusive in their praise for the 33-year-old, who joined the Blaugrana as an 12-year-old and has played at the Nou Camp for his entire career.

"Long live the king," ran Diario Sport's front page. "The game became a homage to Iniesta, who had his dream goodbye."

Further tributes to Iniesta poured in from his team-mates and coach Ernesto Valverde after the game.



"When I was a player I'd have given my arm for some of the touches he can do," said Valverde. "Let's see what happens, Andres is the one who must make the decision [over his future] and communicate it."

Meanwhile, Barcelona president Josep Bartomeu hinted

there was a chance the veteran could stay.

"I know he has offers but Barca is the team of his life, he arrived at 12 years old, he's given everything and has an indefinite contract," said Bartomeu.

(Source: Irish Times)

So close, but so far away – Vorm laments another Spurs failure



Michel Vorm admitted to having no real understanding of why Tottenham appear unable to "take that last step" after their latest failure to secure silverware.

Mauricio Pochettino's side surrendered a 1-0 lead to lose Saturday's FA Cup semi-final 2-1 against Manchester United, ensuring a 10th consecutive season without winning a trophy.

In that time, Spurs have established themselves as regular top-four contenders, but the lack of honours remains a taxing issue and not one goalkeeper Vorm can readily explain.

"It's a tough one. I don't know if it's luck or just a little step, you know? It's hard. It's hard to say 'this is it'," said the Dutchman after being beaten by efforts from Alexis Sanchez and Ander Herrera, which eclipsed Dele Alli's opener at Wembley.

"I think we showed against the [likes of] Real Madrid and all the other games that we can do it."

"But like [in this game against United]

or against Juve, these are the moments that, yes, we're playing well, but we can't just take that last step.

"But I just can't say 'this is it'. It's just devastating, to be honest.

"We are close but so far away."

The 34-year-old, who received some criticism for his showing, revealed how hard Spurs had taken the loss, but urged his team-mates to use the pain as fuel.

"I think if you see in the dressing room, it's a mess," he said. "It sounds a bit cliched maybe, but we need to learn from this as well and I still believe that there's so much more to come for us."

"It just takes time. At the moment, it's hard to believe, but we need to keep on going, keep on pushing, working and learning from these kinds of games.

"Because at the end it's about reaching these finals and trying to win something."

"I definitely believe that we can do better than this with this group."

(Source: Soccerway)

Investment not necessary for United to challenge City – Lukaku



Romelu Lukaku is confident Manchester United's squad already has enough to challenge Manchester City for next season's Premier League title, suggesting investment is not necessary.

Although United have produced a marked improvement in the Premier League from last season's sixth-place finish and look set to end the campaign second, they are some way adrift of City.

Pep Guardiola's men were crowned champions last week as a result of United's shock defeat to rock-bottom West Brom at home.

A win for City over Swansea City on Sunday will restore a huge 16-point gap at the top of the table, but Lukaku insists they are not that much better than United.

Jose Mourinho's side beat Tottenham 2-1 in Saturday's FA Cup semi-final and Lukaku feels the only thing standing between United and challenging City is producing such performances on a consistent basis.

When asked how much investment

United need to challenge City, Lukaku told reporters: "I don't know, you'd have to ask the manager."

"I'm really confident in my team-mates. I think we can do it with the team we have now, but we should have shown more consistency throughout the season"

"For us now it's up to us to be more consistent and the manager needs to see if he has to add more players, but with the players we have now, I think we have enough – we just have to be more consistent."

"It was a strange season for us. If we had more consistency we could have been up there with Manchester City now."

"But we know what we have to improve for next season and winning games like this is what we do."

"If you look at games we have played against the top six, we have won a lot of them so when we played against Tottenham we were confident as well. We have to keep going like that."

(Source: Four Four Two)

Arsene Wenger knew a MONTH ago... He told Arsenal players and there was a stunned silence

Arsene Wenger knew four weeks ago that his 22-year reign at Arsenal was over when it was made clear to him that he would be asked to leave at the end of the season.

The club and close friends have been urging him to accept the inevitable and allow for an appropriate farewell as well as afford Arsenal time to recruit his successor, which is likely to be either Luis Enrique or Joachim Low, though Max Allegri, Brendan Rodgers and Leonardo Jardim are also being considered.

The past few weeks have been spent ensuring that the news, known only by a few key figures, did not leak out so that Wenger could make the announcement.

But the manager would have seen out his contract until 2020 if given the chance to do so and is expected to receive the final year's pay of his deal, which could amount to £10million. Wenger has made it clear to friends that he expects to work elsewhere next season and prefers to stay involved day-to-day at his new club, rather than become a director of football.

The focus at Arsenal is now on recruiting his replacement and Raul Sanllehi, the new head of football relations, is taking a lead role, meaning his preference for Enrique, with whom he worked at Barcelona, makes the Spaniard the favorite.

The logistics of appointing Low, popu-



lar with Arsenal executives, seem to count against him, with the German national team manager having to defend the World Cup this summer and potentially out of action until July 15, which is just four weeks before the start of the new Premier League season. He also has two more years left on his contract with the German FA.

Wenger has cut a beleaguered figure at the club this season as a series of appointments in the last 12 months left him bereft of natural allies.

As well as Sanllehi, chief scout Sven Mislintat, contracts negotiator Huss Fahmy and stats guru Jaeson Rosenfeld are the new power brokers at the club, led by chief ex-

ecutive Ivan Gazidis.

Their regular meetings at Highbury House in recent weeks have not involved Wenger and were the clearest sign to staff that the manager's time was over.

Wenger was aware that at least two board members had been arguing for his removal even last year and the decision of Josh Kroenke, son of owner Stan, to move temporarily to London in January and February and spend his time visiting different departments of the club was also seen as the preparation for the end as he convinced his father, who was responsible for Wenger getting a two-year deal last summer, that change now had to come.

But when the change was actually announced by Wenger, there was little of the expected emotion. It was shortly after 9am on Friday when he called his core staff together for their pre-training meeting.

Then came the news. Even though many had seen it coming, the confirmation was clearly a considerable shock. There was a stunned silence broken by a typically matter-of-fact Wenger saying: 'Right. Let's organize today's training.' He then left to break the news to his players.

Life will go on at Arsenal, but it will never quite feel the same again. Already players and staff are adjusting to the new order.

(Source: Daily Mail)

Queiroz, Domenech, Matthaeus among coaches to apply for Cameroon job

S P O R T S Cameroon have attracted Iran current coach Carlos Queiroz, former France coach Raymond Domenech and German World Cup winner Lothar Matthaeus among the more than 70 coaches who have applied to lead the African champions.

The former Manchester United assistant coach, who led Iran to back-to-back World Cups, has been also linked with Uzbekistan job.

Queiroz is the longest-serving coach among the top five Asian teams. The Portuguese coach took charge of Team Melli on April 4, 2011.

Other well-known names to apply are Rigobert Song, the ex-Cameroon captain who has been coaching the national development team and Philippe Troussier, AP reported.

Cameroon are looking for a new coach less than a year before they defend their African Nations Cup title as tournament hosts.

Belgium's Hugo Broos led Cameroon to the 2017 African title in Gabon in February last year but was fired 10 months later after Cameroon failed to qualify for the World Cup in Russia.

Cameroon Football Federation spokesman Simon Lyonga confirmed the list of applicants.

Others include Tom Saintfiet and Alain Giresse, both with experience of working in Africa. There were 31 Cameroonians who applied for the job.



A bright future ahead of Zurkhaneh Sports, top sports officials say

S P O R T S TEHRAN — Zurkhaneh Sports have a bright future ahead and could become an Olympic event within the next few years, the top sports officials said on the sidelines of the SportAccord 2018.

The six-day summit in Bangkok ended on Friday with participants impressed with the country's organizational skills and its hospitality.

According to the organizers, about 2,800 delegates participated in the SportAccord 2018 held in Bangkok, Thailand from April 15 to 20.

International Zurkhaneh Sport and Koshti Pahlavani (IZSF) participated in the exhibition.

José Perurena, President of the International World Games Association (IWGA), and also President of the International Canoe Federation, said he is delighted to know Zurkhaneh Sports in Thailand's capital.

"Before participating in SportAccord Convention, I was not familiar with Zurkhaneh Sports, but I have to say I am very happy due to recognizing Zurkhaneh Sports. I



think you are on the right track to introducing the Sports," Perurena said.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah, President of Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) and Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), also expressed his satisfaction with

participation of International Zurkhaneh Sports & Koshti Pahlavani Federation in the exhibition.

"I hope with the changes made in the international federation, Zurkhaneh Sports will be officially included in the program of the upcoming events," Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah said.

Five Time Canadian Olympian (Athletics) Charmaine Crooks visited International Zurkhaneh Sports & Koshti Pahlavani Federation booth, saying that women will have the opportunity to practice Zurkhaneh Sports and these sports have potential to spread for women across the world.

"International Olympic Committee (IOC) will definitely support and help the ancient and traditional sports rooted in culture and Zurkhaneh Sports should be taken into consideration," she said.

President of the United World Wrestling (UWW) Nenad Lalovic also visited IZSF booth in Bangkok.

SportAccord is the world's premier and most exclusive annual event in the world of sport attended by leaders in the Olympic movement.

Four girls to represent Iran at Asian Weightlifting Championships



S P O R T S TEHRAN — The four-member Iranian team traveled to Urgench, Uzbekistan to participate at the 25th Asian Junior Women Weightlifting Championships.

Parmida Mahmoudian in the 58kg weight class, Elnaz Bajelani in 63kg, Mahdieh Kalali in 69kg and Narges Mirzaki in +75kg will take part in the competition.

The team will be headed by Reyhaneh Tarighat in the competition.

It's the first time an Iranian women team

participates in an international competition. The 25th Asian Junior Women and 32nd Asian Junior Men Weightlifting Championships are being held from April 20 to 30 in Urgench, Uzbekistan.

The Asian championships will serve as qualification for the 2018 Summer Youth Olympics Games (YOG).

The 2018 YOG will be held from October 6 to 18 at Parque Polideportivo Roca in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The top four Asian teams will earn one quota each.

Nadal eases past Nishikori to claim record-extending 11th Monte Carlo title



MONTE CARLO (Reuters) - Rafa Nadal clinched a record-extending 11th Monte Carlo title as he geared up for his French Open campaign with a 6-3 6-2 victory over Japan's Kei Nishikori in the final on Sunday.

Top seed Nadal, who is also targeting an 11th Roland Garros trophy this year, extended his run of consecutive sets won on clay to 36 after recording the win in an hour and 33 minutes.

The Spaniard's record 31st Masters

title also ensured he retained the world number one ranking ahead of rival Roger Federer.

Nishikori, who missed a large part of last season with a wrist injury, grabbed an early break in the Monaco sunshine before his 31-year-old opponent won four games in a row to take control of the match.

Nadal took the opening set with a blistering forehand and went on to convert two breakpoint opportunities in the second to lift the title.

IPL: Esteghlal beat Paykan, Persepolis beaten by Zob Ahan

S P O R T S TEHRAN — Esteghlal football team earned a late win over Paykan in Tehran's Azadi Stadium, while Persepolis lost to Zob Ahan in the penultimate game of Iran Professional League (IPL) season on Sunday.

Esteghlal edged past Paykan 3-2 thanks to Omid Ebrahimi's late goal.

Arman Ghasemi put the visiting team ahead in the 13th minute but Mame Baba Thiam equalized the match with a header in the 49th minute.

Vouria Ghaffouri made scoreboard 2-1 five minutes later but Faraz Emamali canceled out his goal just after hour mark.

Ebrahimi scored the winner in the 90th minute to keep Esteghlal's hopes alive to finish in second place.

Persepolis, who won the IPL title with three weeks



remaining, suffered a 2-1 away defeat to Zob Ahan in Isfahan's Fooladshahr Stadium.

Ali Alipour was on target in the 48th minute but Milad Fakhreddini equalized the match in the 70th minute.

With three minutes remaining, Zob Ahan Brazilian striker Stanley Kiros headed the ball into back of the net.

Elsewhere, Saipa were held to a goalless draw by Gostaresh Foolad, Esteghlal Khuzestan defeated Sepahan 3-2, Tractor Sazi drew 1-1 with Sanat Naft, Padideh beat Siahjamegan 2-1 in Mashhad derby, Sepidrood Rasht played out a goalless draw against Foolad and Naft lost to Pars Jonoubi 3-0 and were relegated to first tier.

Persepolis sit on top of the table with 61 points, followed by Zob Ahan and Esteghlal with 52 and 51 points respectively.

Iranian woman rock climber after Olympics 2020

The Iranian athlete Elnaz Rekabi is after gaining the right to participate in the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo through 2018 Jakarta Asian Games.

About 200 women annually take part in rock climbing competitions in Iran.

Elnaz Rekabi is an Iranian climber who has achieved remarkable success and has risen to international fame.

She noted that climbing is a unique sport, which develops not only physical strength, but also fortitude, and both of these factors are equally important for victory.

She began to climb in 2001 and she has been the champion of Iran in lead climbing (when you need to

reach the top of the rock within a certain time), bouldering (climbing on routes up to 6 meters and on extremely difficult routes with unbelievable inclinations) and speed climbing for already 15 years.

Elnaz has won 84 medals: eight gold medals, including a gold medal at the Adidas Rockstars boulder competition in Stuttgart, a golden medal at the Asian Rock Climbing Cup, a silver medal in bouldering at the Asia Climbing Championship, a silver medal at the Asia Climbing Championship in Iran and a bronze medal in lead climbing at the Asian Sport Climbing Championship in Indonesia.



Amir Abedzadeh ready to play in World Cup: Report

Persian League — Maritimo goalkeeper Amir Abedzadeh is ready to play in the 2018 FIFA World Cup for Iran national football team, A Bola reported.

Abedzadeh, who turns 25 on April 26, is in good position to play in the Russia World Cup, the newspaper reported.

Iran assistant coach Oceano Cruz was in Braga to track the goalkeeper and A Bola wrote that Abedzadeh can be Iran keeper in the World Cup.

Amir Abedzadeh is the son of former Iranian national team goalkeeper Ahmad Reza Abedzadeh.

Iran have been drawn in Group B with Spain, Morocco and Portugal.

Team Melli will kick off the tournament with a match against Morocco at Saint Petersburg on June 15.

Iran will face Spain in Kazan on 20 June before meeting Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal in Saransk five days later.



Iran sitting volleyball extend winning streak to four at World Super 6

PARALYMPIC.ir — Iran national sitting volleyball team extended their winning streak in the World Super 6 to four games.

Iran defeated Germany in straight sets (25-13, 25-12, 25-15) at the Sadra Sport Complex in the northwestern Iranian city of Tabriz on Sunday.

Team Melli started the event with a 3-0 win over Russia and beat Bosnia and Herzegovina 3-2 in their second match. Iran also defeated Ukraine in straight sets.

Hadi Rezaei's men will play USA on Monday. Six of the world's best male sitting volleyball national teams participate at the Super 6 from April 19 to 24.

This is the second edition of the international competition, which only included women's teams last year and saw Russia taking gold in Hangzhou, China.

The event features reigning world champion Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paralympic gold medalist Iran, world No.6 Germany, No.9 Russia, No.5 Ukraine and No.8 USA.

The teams play in a round-robin format, with all six teams facing each other once and the overall best two qualifying for the final on 24 April. The third and fourth will play for the bronze.

Iran announce squad for AFC Women's Futsal Championship

TASNIM — Iran's women's futsal coach Shahrzad Mozaffar has invited 14 players to the national team for the AFC Women's Futsal Championship.

The competition will be held from May 2 to 12 in Thailand.

■ Squad:

Nasimeh Gholami, Fereshteh Karimi, Farzaneh Tavasoli, Arezoo Sedghianzadeh, Fatemeh Papi, Tahereh Mehdipour, Fereshteh Khosravi, Nastaran Moghimi, Sara Shirbeigi, Leyla Khodabandehloo, Fahimeh Zarei, Fatemeh Etedadi, Fatemeh Arjangi and Mahsa Kamali.

Iran have been drawn in Group D along with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Hong Kong, Indonesia, Macau and Thailand are in Group A. Group B consists of Bangladesh, Chinese Taipei, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Bahrain, China, Japan and Lebanon are drawn in Group C. Team Melli claimed the title of the first edition, which was held in Malaysia in 2015.

Iran's Hadadi seizes gold at Beach Invitational

Ehsan Hadadi of Iran claimed a gold medal on the final day of the Beach Invitational in Los Angeles, United States.

In an event that featured multiple top competitors, the men's discus won by three-time Olympian Ehsan Hadadi.

The Iranian thrower broke the meet record with a 66.20m throw, winning a \$1000 cash prize.

Hadadi had won two gold medals last week in Chula Vista, Saint Diego.

Hadadi is currently training under guidance of Mac Wilkins in Unites States of America.

He competed and won a silver medal at the 2012 Summer Olympics with a 68.18 m throw.

Hadadi is preparing for the 2018 IAAF Diamond League, salted for May 4 in Doha.

(Source: Longbeachstate.com)

Mick McDermott returns to Team Melli

Persian League — Irish fitness coach Mick McDermott has returned to Iran national football team.

The trainer left Team Melli in July 2012 to join Al Nasr club of Dubai but returned to Iran as assistant coach of Esteghlal in 2017.

The 44-year-old coach also replaced Alireza Mansourian as the Iranian football club interim coach.

According to Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), McDermott has returned to Iran to train injured Mehdi Taremi and Morteza Pouraliganji.

ISNA did not go in the details of McDermott's return but it seems he will accompany Team Melli in the 2018 World Cup.

Iran have been drawn in Group B with Spain, Morocco and Portugal.

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Iran launches online movie database for English-speaking people

A R T TEHRAN — The Cinema Organization of Iran (COI) has launched an English website providing information related to Iranian movies.

The website, entitled “Chronology of Iranian Cinema (CIC)”, was introduced on the sidelines of the 36th Fajr International Film Festival at Tehran’s Charsu Cineplex on Saturday.

“Iranian cinema is well known in the world, but a reliable source with information on the history of Iranian cinema in English was missing,” the manager of the project, Iraj Taqipur, said at the launching ceremony of the site that can be found at cicinema.com.

“This is the first phase of the project and we hope to improve the site in the near future,” he added.

Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Abbas Salehi and COI director Mohammad-Mehdi Heidarian, and the secretary of Fajr festival, Reza Mirkarimi attended the ceremony.

The Fajr International Film Festival will run at Tehran’s Charsu Cineplex until April 27.

Persian-speaking Indian scholars pay tribute to Sadi

CULTURE TEHRAN — A number of Persian-speaking Indian scholars and students gathered at the Persian Research Center in New Delhi on Saturday to celebrate National Sadi Day.

The director of the center, Ehsanollah Shokrollahi, talked about the role of the poet in Persian literature and his position on the subcontinent, the Persian service of IRNA reported on Sunday.

He also gave a brief explanation about the activities of the center as well as the Sadi Foundation, which is a Tehran-based organization that provides Persian language educational services abroad.

Professor Akhtar Mahdi, a retired professor of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, also delivered a lecture about the impact of Sadi’s Gulistan (The Rose Garden) in the every-day speech of Persian-speaking people.

One of the greatest figures of classical Persian literature, Sheikh Muslih od-Din Sadi Shirazi (C. 1213-1291) is famous worldwide for his Bustan (The Orchard) and Gulistan (The Rose Garden).

“Avatar” director Cameron says he still hopes to film four sequels

MANHATTAN BEACH, Calif. (Reuters) — “Avatar” director James Cameron said he still aims to make four sequels to the 2009 science-fiction blockbuster and is moving ahead with production while regulators review the proposed sale of 21st Century Fox’s film studio to Walt Disney Co.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, Cameron said he is about 100 days into filming the second and third “Avatar” installments under a deal with Fox. If those are successful, he plans to continue with the fourth and fifth movies, which he already has written.

“I’m personally committed to all of them,” he said at the Manhattan Beach, California, studio where the sequels are being made.

Designs for creatures and characters for the four planned sequels are posted on walls inside the studio, Cameron said, but he did not show them to reporters.

“If you were Rupert Murdoch, you could go see them,” he joked, adding: “Or Bob Iger.”

Murdoch-owned Fox has committed to distributing the next movie in the franchise, but the film studio is in the process of being sold to Disney as part of a \$52 billion deal. Disney chief executive officer Iger has not seen the designs for the sequels, Cameron said, because there are restrictions on their collaboration while the deal is under regulatory review.

Majidi says it was risky to make “Beyond the Clouds” in India

A R T TEHRAN — Oscar-nominated Iranian director Majid Majidi who has made his latest movie “Beyond the Clouds” in India has said that it was very risky for him to make the movie in the country.

“I had proposals from several Indian producers to make a film in their country, but I viewed them as highly risky since I knew very little about Indian culture,” Majidi said during a workshop organized at the 36th Fajr International Film Festival on Saturday.

“I feel a strong affinity between Indian and Iranian cultures but I had to increase my knowledge of the Indian culture in order to make my film’s story believable,” he added.

He said he hired all members of his cast and crew except his assistant from India. “The Bollywood cinema has its unique rules and we must follow their rules if we want our film to do very well at the box office,” he added.

According to Majid, exterior scenes in many Indian films are shot at large studios that they have. However, he chose to film the exterior scenes of his movie outdoors in Mumbai.

He described Mumbai as a very crowded city where horns are blaring constantly. “I wanted to make my film in a real place consequently shooting lasted for over seven months on location in the heart of Mumbai,” he said.

Starring Ishaan Khattar, Malavika Mohanan and Sharada, “Beyond the Clouds” tells the story a young boy, Amir, and his sister, Tara, in Mumbai. When on the run from the cops, Amir finds his estranged sister, who in a bid to protect her brother lands in

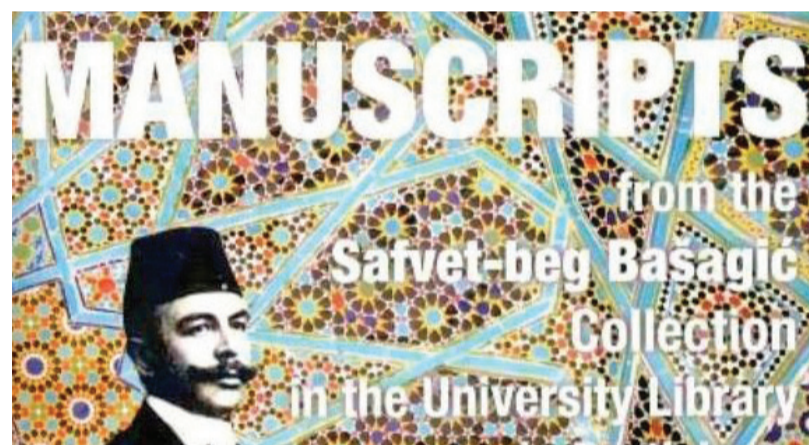


Iranian director Majid Majidi speaks during a workshop at the 36th Fajr International Film Festival at Tehran’s Charsu Cineplex on April 21, 2018. (FIFF/Farnaz Azizi)

jail. Their entire lives are clouded by despair when, unexpectedly, the light shines on them from beyond the clouds.

Oscar-winning composer A. R. Rahman who collaborated with Majidi in “Beyond the Clouds” and “Muhammad: The Messenger of God” is scheduled to arrive in Iran on Tuesday to hold a workshop during the Fajr International Film Festival.

Rare collection from Bratislava library on display in Tehran



A poster for an exhibition of rare Persian manuscripts from the University Library in Bratislava at the National Library and Archives of Iran

A R T TEHRAN — A selection of rare Persian manuscripts from the University Library in Bratislava, Slovakia, has been showcased in an exhibition, which opened at the National Library and Archives of Iran (NLAI) on Sunday.

The selection is composed of 10 books from a collection donated by Safvet-beg Bašagic (1870–1934), the Bosnian writer who is considered the father of the Bosnian Renaissance.

The collection originally contains over

600 manuscripts and prints in Arabic, Turkish and Persian. It was inscribed in UNESCO Memory of the World Program in 1997.

University Library Director-General Silvia Stasselova and NLAI Manuscripts Department director Ali Ojabi attended the opening ceremony of the exhibition, which will run for five days, the NLAI reported.

The University Library in Bratislava Digital gave the NLAI copies of the full texts of 88 Persian manuscripts preserved at the library in Bratislava.

Cartoonist Alireza Pakdel honored at Norwegian contest



Iranian cartoonist Alireza Pakdel’s work won a third prize at A Colorful Human World International Cartoon Contest and Exhibition in Norway.

A R T TEHRAN — Iranian cartoonist Alireza Pakdel has won a third prize at A Colorful Human World International Cartoon Contest and Exhibition in Norway.

The organizers announced two winners for each prize in a statement published last week on Thursday. The competition was held on the theme of immigration.

Pakdel’s cartoon shows people who leave their souls in homeland after emigration. Jitet Koestana from Indonesia also

received the third award.

The Grand Prize was given to Dimitris Georgopolis from Greece and Bonil Xavier Bonilla from Ecuador.

Guy Badeaux Bado from Canada and Silvano Mello from Brazil also received the second prize.

A jury of ten members have selected a collection of the submitted cartoons, which will be showcased in an exhibit at the Norwegian Literature House in Oslo and published on the Cartoon Home Network International.

Austin Powers movies’ Mini-Me, Verne Troyer, dies



Actor Verne Troyer arrives on the red carpet at the Muhammad Ali Celebrity Fight Night Awards XIX in Phoenix, Arizona March 23, 2013. REUTERS/Ralph Fresno/File Photo

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — The diminutive actor who starred in the Austin Powers movies’ as “Mini Me”, Verne Troyer, died Saturday at a hospital in Los Angeles. He was 49.

“It is with great sadness and heavy hearts to write that Verne passed away today,” his family posted on his Instagram account.

The cause of death was not announced, but the family wrote that “depression and suicide are very serious issues.”

“You never know what kind of battle someone is going through inside. But be kind to one another. And always know, it’s never too late to reach out to someone for help,” they said.

Troyer, who was 2 feet 8 inches (81 cm) tall, is best known for Austin Powers movies “The Spy Who Shagged Me” and “Austin Power in Goldmember.”

He also had the role of the goblin Griphook in the Harry Potter movies.

Troyer’s height was due to achondroplasia dwarfism, Variety reported.

He once said that his parents “never treated me any different than my other average-sized siblings. I used to have to carry wood, feed the cows and pigs and farm animals.”

He was never trained as an actor, but while he was a telephone customer service worker, a friend told him that Hollywood producers were looking for someone to be a stunt double for a baby, Troyer told an entertainment news website, HollywoodChicago.com.

He had more than 25 other film credits to his name, including roles in “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,” “The Love Guru,” and “The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus.”

A statement from his publicist on his Facebook account said he had gone through “a recent time of adversity.” His family also posted online that Verne was a “fighter when it came to his own battles. Over the years he’s struggled and won, struggled and won, struggled and fought some more, but unfortunately this time was too much.”

Springsteen’s “Born to Run” lyrics could fetch \$300,000 at auction



Singer Bruce Springsteen performs during the closing ceremony for the Invictus Games in Toronto, Ontario, Canada September 30, 2017. (Reuters/Mark Blinch)

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Bruce Springsteen’s early, handwritten manuscript to “Born to Run,” the rocker’s 1975 star-making hit, is expected to fetch between \$200,000 and \$300,000 when it goes up for auction in June, Sotheby’s said on Friday.

The working draft, a single page of ruled paper pulled from a spiral notebook, is written entirely in Springsteen’s hand, the auction house said.

Most of the handwritten lyrics did not make it into the final version of the 4-1/2-minute song, a soaring rock anthem in which the singer asks his lover to break free with him from a small U.S. town. The manuscript does contain a near match to the completed chorus, Sotheby’s said.

Rolling Stone magazine has rated “Born to Run” Springsteen’s greatest achievement and No. 21 on its list of greatest songs ever recorded.

The song was the first track on side two of the album “Born to Run,” Springsteen’s

third. The album was his breakout success that sold more than 6 million copies in the United States, according to the Recording Industry Association of America.

The manuscript, which Sotheby’s said is being put up by a private American collector, last went under the hammer in 2013 where it sold for \$197,000 at the auction house.

Original song lyrics have become a booming market for collectors. Bob Dylan’s original, handwritten lyrics for “Like a Rolling Stone” sold for more than \$2 million at auction in 2014, and Don McLean’s original manuscript for “American Pie” fetched \$1.2 million in 2015.

Springsteen is currently starring in his own one-man show, “Springsteen on Broadway”, in New York in which he tells stories about his life and career, and plays some of his songs.

The “Born to Run” lyrics will be sold as part Sotheby’s June 18-28 online auction of books and manuscripts.