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REPORT
Ramin Hossein Abadian
Mehr News Agency
journalist

Assad, Putin's green light for battle of Idlib

All eyes are on Idlib and the terrorist group's fate there. Media are reporting on massive preparations by the Syrian army and its dispatch to the northern fronts of the country.

More equipment has been sent to Idlib suburbs, and troops under the command of the famous general, Suheil al-Hassan, are based in the outskirts. The equipment includes tanks and other weapons, as the Syrian army prepares to recapture Idlib. Many Syrian force have been stationed at Jourin base in the northwest of the countryside beyond Hama and in al-Ahmar in Jab al-Ahmar village in Latakia and surrounds.

General Suheil al-Hassan is Syria's most notorious commander who is said to be undefeated in war. He has achieved significant success in battles against armed terrorist groups in Syria. Known as the Tiger, he successfully used psychological warfare techniques using large speakers that spread frightening messages.

The terrorist groups that are in Idlib

There are various terrorist groups in Idlib, the most important of which is the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly called Jabhat al-Nusra. In particular, since July 2017, the group has had the most influence in Idlib.

Smaller groups are Jaysh al-Badia and Jaysh al-Malahim fighting in the south of Idlib. On January 11, 2018, Jaysh al-Malahim issued a statement saying it was fighting in southern Idlib alongside Jaysh al-Badiya.

The Turkistan Islamic Party, which has close ties to al-Qaeda found in Xinjiang Province, western China, is considered broadly as a terrorist group but is present in Syria. The group has media tools such as the Telegram, which publishes their statements and activities.

In July 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham defeated its only serious rival, Ahrar al-Sham, for factional dominance in Syria's insurgent-held northwest, centered on Idlib province.

Other groups include other movements such as Nour Al-Din Al-Zinki, Jaysh Al-Ahrar, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Ezzah, (a Free Syrian Army flagged faction), and some smaller groups in Idlib. **→7**

'Transferring nuclear tech to Saudi is most destabilizing development'

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
By Payman Yazdani

TEHRAN — Touching upon Trump's attempt to transfer sensitive nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia, Prof. Entessar says this is the most destabilizing and dangerous development that will embolden Takfiri extremists.

The U.S. President Donald Trump is rushing to transfer sensitive nuclear power technology to Saudi Arabia, according to a new congressional report.

To shed more light on the consequences of such act, we reached out to Nader Entessar, professor emeritus of political science from university of South Alabama.

Following is the full text of our interview with him:

■ What can be the consequences of such an act for the region?

A: As the recently-released report of the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Oversight and Reform indicated, selling and transferring sensitive nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia could allow that country to produce nuclear weapons and thus contribute to a potential nuclear arms race in an already unstable region. Transferring sensitive nuclear technology to the al-Saud regime will be the most destabilizing and dangerous development in the long and cozy relationship between Washington and Riyadh.

■ As the Saudi Kingdom is the main sponsor of Takfiri extremism all around the world, what can be consequences of such act globally?

A: At a minimum, such an act will embolden the Takfiri groups to accelerate their terrorist activities in the region and beyond. They may reason that since their chief sponsor is on its way to becoming a nuclear power with added muscle, it is safer for them to put their criminal acts in overdrive.

■ The U.S. is committed to Israeli regime's security. Can such a move create possible threats to the security of Tel Aviv despite current cooperation between Riyadh and Tel Aviv?

A: One of the pillars of Israeli foreign policy in the region is preventing the emergence of another nuclear-capable state in the region. In other words, Israel's regional foreign policy emphasizes that country's nuclear monopoly and supremacy. **→7**

Analysis of MBS trip to three Asian countries

By Saeid Sobhani

TEHRAN — Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's Asian tour happens while still the murder of Jamal Khashoggi is a cloud hanging over him.

The trips, each with its own goals and messages, were accompanied by specific incidents such as explosions that incurred which delayed bin Salman's trip to other countries on the schedule.

■ Here are some points regarding MBS Asian tour:

First, MBS's Asian tour being delayed by a day is a rare diplomatic incident and displays disarranged travel schedule, while trips of such nature are packed with back to back programs that leaves no room for errors. Thus, the objective of

this trip seems to have been just to hang around.

Second, the Pakistani media reported Riyadh has paid for the trip expenses in full, from MBS personal stuff to 3,500 doves bought at local market flown when the Saudi Crown Prince steps out of his plan and is welcomed in the Asian countries.

Third, the cancellation of MBS trip to Malaysia and Indonesia without a particular reason shows no specific objective behind the trip.

■ Two pivotal points about Saudi Crown Prince trip to Pakistan are:

- Pakistan's nuclear program and Saudis' nuclear ambition

- Terrorist groups, who the army provides political coverage for get to compete in elections to silence the opposition voices

■ Two possible scenarios of MBS's trip to Asian counties:

First, since Mohammad bin Salman couldn't face the West after ordering the killing of khashoggi, concluded by the CIA, he decided to go eastward to avert attention from the issue. He was sending a message to the U.S. that he is willing to have nuclear cooperation with China, and Pakistan and invest in the East, should Washington go easy on him. MBS also sought to improve Saudi Arabia's image after the rise of Qataris.

Second, the U.S. has orchestrated a move in which MBS on behalf of the U.S. and in line with the support of terrorism makes attempts to turn Iran-Pakistan relations sour and negatively influence Tehran-Delhi oil interaction. **→6**

Private sector should contribute to oil fields development

TEHRAN — Director of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC)'s Discovery Department said the private sector should be able to contribute to developing the country's oil fields, IRNA reported on Saturday.

Speaking in the 3rd Iran International Exploration and Production Congress and Exhibition (Iran E&P 2019) in Tehran, Saleh Hendi noted that like the mining

sector in which mines are being developed by the private sector, NIOC should also award oilfield development projects to capable private companies.

"Iran has huge resources of shale oil, shale gas and gas hydrates which have not yet been developed; exploration and development of these resources should be awarded to the private sector," the official said. **→4**

Admiral: Iran to hold naval drills with regional states

TEHRAN — Chief of the Iranian Navy Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi has said that Iran plans to hold joint naval drills with friendly regional countries in the future.

"We will hold a naval drill with friendly countries in the region, especially with the Indian Ocean Rim Association member states," he told the Mehr news agency in an interview published on Saturday.

He also said that the Iranian navy will unveil a new generation of hovercrafts next year, noting that the hovercrafts are being produced completely by Iranian experts.

Elsewhere, he predicted that the presence of hegemonic powers in the region will come to an end cut in the near future.

Kushner is behind sending sensitive U.S. nuclear tech to Saudi: Askari

By Javad Heirannia

TEHRAN — Professor Hossein Askari, an expert on Saudi Arabia who also teaches international business at the George Washington University, believes that the origin of the initiative of the sending sensitive U.S. nuclear technology "was General Flynn, the disgraced first National Security Advisor to Donald Trump. But

now I think that MBS has followed up on this with Jared Kushner."

"So today, I believe the main advocate for this are Kushner, U.S. nuclear power plant builders, such as Westinghouse and General Electric, and possibly Donald Trump's sons," Hossein Askari, who served as special advisor to Saudi finance minister, tells the Tehran Times. **→7**



ARTICLE
Syed Zafar Mehdi
Journalist
from New Delhi

Pakistan a pawn in Saudi's sinister game

When Pakistan premier Imran Khan took oath of office in August last year, there was a lot of speculation about his government's foreign policy, especially relations with Tehran and Riyadh.

His victory speech, in which he firmly declared his commitment to strengthen ties with allies in the Middle East, mentioning Saudi Arabia and Iran in the same breath, was seen as an indication of Islamabad's balancing act between the two regional heavyweights.

More importantly, it appeared a welcome shift from his predecessor Nawaz Sharif's overt and barefaced proximity towards Riyadh.

The overwhelming influence of military leadership in Pakistan, especially in foreign policy matters, is an undeniable fact. Many observers believe Sharif's eventful political career was cut short by the military, and Khan was brought in as his replacement.

While some astute political pundits were of the opinion that Khan, a cricketer-turned-politician, too would have limited say in foreign policy matters, it was widely believed that relations between Iran and Pakistan would improve under him.

When the new government in Islamabad rebuffed the United States saying it reserves the right to 'pursue legitimate economic and commercial interests' with Iran in the wake of re-imposition of economic sanctions on Tehran by the Trump administration, it was significant on many counts.

The statement was a clear indication that the Imran Khan government would not buckle under the U.S. pressure and would chart its own independent foreign policy. That was something his predecessor had failed to do.

Khan even said that his government would revive the ambitious Iran-Pakistan pipeline project that was put on the backburner by the previous government under the pressure of Riyadh and Washington.

All these developments seemed encouraging and suggested that the new government in Islamabad, which came to power on the plank of 'Naya Pakistan' (New Pakistan), would chart an independent course, without succumbing to the influence of Western and Arab powers. **→6**



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'23 Individuals' tops at Qoqnus Screen Awards

TEHRAN — "23 Individuals" by Mehdi Jafari, an epic movie about 23 young Iranian volunteers who were captives during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, was crowned best film at the 8th edition of the Qoqnus Screen Awards on Friday.

Organized by the Art Bureau of the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization, the Qoqnus Screen Awards honors revolutionary films and cineastes.

Despite their standard procedure for honoring cineastes in various categories, the organizers decided to present only four awards this year. **→16**

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



Iran to become dead offensive should enemy attack: general

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Brigadier General Hossein Salami, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps second-in-command, on Saturday highlighted Iran's preparedness to counter foreign threats, saying should the enemy dare to attack the Islamic Republic, Iran will become offensive to the core.

In a speech in the southeastern city of Kerman, Salami said a nation that cherishes martyrdom on the path of God will never be defeated and will never be fearful of the enemy. "The martyrs were martyred on the offensive," he asserted, Tasnim reported.

"The whole world should know that when we talk about martyrdom it does not mean that we stand still so that the enemy attack us and kill us," he added.



Military: Raid on border guard killers will be relentless

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi, a senior spokesman for the Iranian military, has said armed forces will not rest until they severely punish those terrorists who killed the IRGC border guards on Feb. 13 in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan, IRNA reported on Saturday.

Shekarchi said the next steps for taking revenge from terrorists will be announced soon, adding, "We are resisting until the death of our enemies."

He was referring to the suicide attack on a bus carrying IRGC forces on February 13, which killed and injured dozens of the forces. A terrorist group called Jeish al-Adl later claimed responsibility for the incident.



55 tons of illegal drugs seized since March 2018

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The commander of Iran's border police has said 55 tons of illegal drugs have been confiscated since the beginning of the current Iranian year, starting March 21, 2018.

Addressing a conference on geopolitical developments at Iranian borders, Qassem Rezaei said no country in the world faces the same amount of border threats as Iran does, IRNA reported on Saturday.

The border threats are not comparable with those of before the Islamic Revolution, Rezaei remarked.

The border police chief added that border guards have three duties, first military and defensive, second enforcement and third diplomatic ones.



Army fires cruise missiles, torpedoes in war game

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iran's Navy on Saturday fired several homegrown cruise missiles and torpedoes from its vessels and submarines on the second day of war games in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, Fars reported.

Iranian naval forces on Friday started a massive three-day drill in an area of two million square kilometers, from the strategic Strait of Hormuz to the southeastern coasts of Makran, the Sea of Oman and the northern parts of the Indian Ocean.

On Saturday, Naqdi destroyer and Tabarzin missile-launching frigate fired two home-made Qader and Qadir cruise missiles at targets.



Pakistan Army vows to work with Iran to prevent terror acts

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The Pakistani Army tries to prevent terrorist attacks like what happened to IRGC forces on Zahedan-Khash border on Feb. 13 and it will cooperate with Iran to investigate the case, Director General of Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) said on Friday.

Iran and Pakistan enjoy great cooperation to enhance the security in common borders and these ties will continue, Major General Asif Ghafoor said, Mehr reported.

There are third parties who want to sow discord between the friendly countries of Iran and Pakistan, he said, adding that terrorism is a common challenge for all regional countries and all should cooperate to resolve the issue.



Ugandan FM welcomes better ties with Iran

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa said on Saturday that his country is determined to widen relations with Iran and welcomes the contribution of Iranian companies, IRNA reported.

Speaking at a meeting in Kampala with Iranian Ambassador to Uganda Morteza Mortazavi, Kutesa said Uganda is an independent country and is not obligated to follow the unilateral approach of some countries which try to exert pressure on Iran to keep it from cooperating with other countries.

Mortazavi, on behalf of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, invited Kutesa to visit Iran. The invitation was welcomed by the Ugandan side.

Iran well able to block oil sales but hopes it won't come to that, Shamkhani says

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, says Iran has multiple methods at its disposal for blocking the region's oil exports but "we hope we wouldn't be pressed into using them."

In an interview with Tasnim published on Saturday, Shamkhani said, "Cutting off oil exports does not necessarily amount to blocking the Strait of Hormuz. In fact there are multiple methods to make that happen."

He also said Iran has devised initiatives to foil U.S. sanctions on its oil exports, underlining that Tehran has multiple ways to sell its crude.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has designed and put into practice initiatives that would neutralize the illegal U.S. sanctions against Iran's export of oil," he said.

Shamkhani argued that although the U.S. pressures may inflict some costs on Iran, but they could not undermine the Islamic Republic's resolve.

The top security official also pointed to



the huge turnout in the recent countrywide rallies celebrating the 40th anniversary of

the Islamic Revolution as an example of the great support that the Iranian society

provides for the government.

In 2018, the U.S. government imposed new rounds of sanctions on Iran after its May withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the official name for the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

In comments in January, President Hassan Rouhani said there are several methods available for Iran to sell its oil despite U.S. sanctions.

"We proudly get around the U.S. sanctions," Rouhani stated.

■ 'UAE officials sending messages for clearing up misunderstandings with Iran'

Shamkhani, an ethnic Arab from Khuzestan province, also said attempts by Washington to create a coalition against Iran will get nowhere, noting there is differences between Arabs in dealing with Iran.

"Even the (United Arab) Emirates' position are not quite compatible with Saudi Arabia, and there is officials in the Emirates who are sending messages for clearing up misunderstandings."

IAEA reaffirms Iran's compliance to nuclear deal

By staff and agency

The International Atomic Energy Agency has reaffirmed Iran's compliance to the 2015 nuclear deal, which is known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Iran has remained within the key limits on its nuclear activities imposed by its 2015 deal with major powers despite growing pressure from newly reimposed U.S. sanctions, a report by the UN nuclear watchdog showed on Friday, according to Reuters.

In a quarterly report distributed to member states on Friday, the IAEA said Iran has kept to the caps placed on its uranium enrichment levels and enriched uranium stocks.

The UN nuclear watchdog has confirmed Iran's compliance to the JCPOA for 14 times since the deal went into force in January 2016. The deal was signed in July 2015 in Vienna between Iran, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the U.S., Britain, France, Russia, and China) plus Germany.



Despite repeated confirmations by the IAEA, U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled Washington out of the JCPOA in May 2018 and ordered reimposition of sanctions against Iran.

The U.S. has also threatened to punish any company that do business with Iran.

Iran not to take decision on nuclear deal emotionally: Salehi

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Ali Akbar Salehi, director of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, said on Saturday that Tehran will not take decision on the 2015 nuclear deal emotionally.

"As it was said by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution [Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei] clearly, we monitor the other side's actions in order to take wise actions and avoid deciding based on emotion," he said on the sidelines of visiting an exhibition.

According to a new report released by the UN nuclear watchdog on Friday, Iran has remained within the key limits on its nuclear activities imposed by its 2015 deal with major powers despite growing pressure from newly reimposed U.S. sanctions.

Under the nuclear deal, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran agreed to put limits on its nuclear activities

in exchange for termination of economic and financial sanctions.

■ FATF move 'proves the other side does not want us to reach a deadlock'
Commenting on the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) action in extending suspension of its measures against Iran, Salehi said, "The move proves that the other side does not want us to reach a deadlock."

"We will take any decision that serves the national interests," he noted.

The Paris-based FATF watchdog announced on Friday that Iran has until June to fix its anti-money laundering and terrorism financing rules or face increased international scrutiny of its banks.

Last October, the global watchdog had already given Iran until February to complete an action plan of reforms that would bring it in line with global norms, or face

consequences.

The FATF concluded this week at a meeting that "there are still items not completed" and said in a statement it "expects Iran to proceed swiftly in the reform path", according to Reuters.

One of the actions Iran is required to take to appease the FATF is joining the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), which is also called the Palermo Convention, a 2000 United Nations-sponsored multilateral treaty against transnational organized crime.

The other action is to join the CFT (the convention combatting financing of terrorism).

On October 7, 2018, the Majlis (parliament) voted in favor of the CFT. However, the oversight Guardian Council rejected the bill by finding 22 faults with it.

To become a law, the Guardian Council



should vet the bill for compliance with the Constitution.

According to the constitution, in cases when the parliament and the Guardian Council disagree on a bill the issue is referred to the Expediency Council for final arbitration. The bill is now under study by the Expediency Council.

U.S. planned but failed to keep Daesh alive for decades: Hatami

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The United States planned to keep Daesh in the region for 30 to 40 years but it failed, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami said on Saturday.

Brigadier General Hatami made the remarks at the opening ceremony of Forerunners of Technology and Industry exhibition in Tehran.

Hatami further pointed to Washington's failures, saying, "They wanted to show to our neighbors that our defense power is dangerous but we showed that our power is for regional peace and security."

"Today, the enemies are targeting the souls of our people... The enemies want our people to become disappointed in and distrustful of the establishment but they will not succeed," he said, Mehr reported.

"We should not be disappointed because today we stand on a more secure platform," he added.

Hatami said Iran has managed to foil the enemies' plots in the region,



and has won both peace and war. "They started the war but we finished it," he stated.

The defense chief also said 85 percent of Iran's defense needs are produced domestically, stressing that Fateh missile, Fakour air-to-air missile, Hoveyze missile, Fateh submarine and Kowsar aircraft are among the top achievements of Iran's defense sector.

Referring to Fateh submarine as a great achievement, Hatami said everyone knows that designing and producing submarines is more complicated than producing aircraft.

Russia calls U.S. pressure on business with Iran 'unacceptable', 'deeply concerning'

By staff and agency

Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said on Friday that the U.S. attempts to stop Russia's lawful operations in Iran are "unacceptable" and "deeply concerning".

According to UrduPoint News, Zakharova told reporters that an "openly biased" New York-based organization called United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) had sent letters to Russian firms operating in Iran giving them two weeks to report on their activities in the Islamic Republic.

"We think such actions are unacceptable and deeply concerning."

"Attempts to pressure and threaten Russian business... are a follow-up on the dishonorable anti-Iranian cause by the U.S. administration," the spokeswoman said.

In May 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled Washington out of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) and ordered reimposition of sanctions against Iran.

The U.S. has threatened to punish any company that do business with Iran.

In a speech to a security conference in



Munich on February 16, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Europe should follow Washington's lead in pulling out of the nuclear deal.

Over 50 pro-diplomacy organizations in the United States have slammed Trump's aggressive anti-Iran policy, calling on congressmen to stand against Washington's sanctions and press it to return to the 2015 multinational nuclear deal.

They said that the anti-Iran bans "disrupt any party's implementation of the JCPOA," "prevent the United States from coming back into compliance with the JCPOA in the future," "disproportionately impact Iranian civilians" and "block necessary humanitarian and medical supplies from reaching the country."

Rouhani: Technology can weather sanctions pressure

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — In remarks on Saturday, President Hassan Rouhani suggested that development of technology can lessen the effects of sanctions pressure on Iran.

Rouhani made the remarks while addressing managers of knowledge-based corporations in Tehran.

The president, who also inspected products of knowledge-based companies along with his deputy for science and technology Sorena Sattari, said, "Technology will open the doors and solve the problems."

He said, "Knowledge-based corporations can counter the enemy's pressure. At current juncture, we expect the

knowledge-based corporations to help."

The president said his government attaches great importance to self-sufficiency to counter the hegemonic system in the world.

He promised that interactions between the government and the knowledge-based corporations will be facilitated.

"Sanctions are intended to deter advancement of technology and we should use sanctions as an opportunity to develop technology," Rouhani suggested.

In a violation of the UN Security Council resolution 2231, the Trump administration withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 nuclear deal and rolled back sanctions against Iran.

Rouhani also noted that technological and scientific progress can be achieved when there is an atmosphere for freedom of thought.

"If there is a free-thinking environment then technology will blossom as the fruit of science."

In an open reference to U.S. President Donald Trump who is struggling to build a wall along the border with Mexico, Rouhani said, "Any country that surrounds itself with walls will be annihilated from within."

He added, "Certain countries are now trying to build walls and they are ignorant of the fact their progress is due to the time that there was no wall."

Turkey tells U.S. not to leave power vacuum in Syria withdrawal

Turkey's defense minister told Pentagon officials there must not be a vacuum of power during the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, state-owned Anadolu news agency reported on Saturday.

A senior U.S. administration official said on Friday Washington would leave about 400 U.S. troops split between two Syrian regions, a reversal by President Donald Trump that could pave the way for U.S. allies to keep troops in Syria.

"We reminded our partners that there should be no vacuum of power in any way during the withdrawal," Defense Minister Hulusi Akar told Anadolu, describing his talks in the United States with acting U.S. Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan.

Trump had ordered the withdrawal of all 2,000 U.S. troops Syria in December after saying they had defeated ISIL terrorists in Syria. The abrupt decision sparked an outcry from allies and U.S. lawmakers.

But he was persuaded on Thursday that about 200 U.S. troops would join what is expected to be a total commitment of some 800 to 1,500 troops from European allies to set up and observe a "safe zone" in northeastern Syria, the U.S. administration official said.

Akar also said he repeated call for Kurdish YPG militia fighters, which Ankara regards as terrorists, to be removed from the "safe zone", which Turkey wants to control.

■ Trump agrees to keep about 400 U.S. troops in Syria

Donald Trump has agreed to keep about 400 U.S. troops in Syria after the withdrawal of most U.S. forces there this spring, a senior administration official said Friday.

Trump agreed on Thursday to keep about 200 U.S. troops as part of planned multinational force that would maintain a safe zone in northeastern Syria, the official said. This force would be in addition to the 200 troops the U.S. is planning to maintain after the withdrawal at its base in at-Tanf, Syria, the official said.

Trump on Friday denied that the decision represented a reversal of his previous position.

"I'm not reversing course. I have done something nobody else has been able to do," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office.

He continued, "At the same time, we can leave a small force, along with others in the force, whether it's NATO troops or whoever it might be, so that it doesn't start up again. And I'm OK. It's a very small, tiny fraction of the people we have and a lot of people like that idea and I'm open to ideas."

Acting Secretary of Defense Pat Shanahan refused to confirm Syria troop numbers



Friday while addressing reporters at the Pentagon prior to a meeting with his Turkish counterpart.

"I'm not going to talk troop numbers or troop movements but I think we saw some good progress yesterday and today's meeting really is about talking next steps," Shanahan said.

The U.S. and NATO allies are in the process of assembling what officials are calling a "monitoring and observer" force of roughly 800 to 1,500 troops to maintain a safe zone in northeastern Syria. The goal of the force would be to maintain a buffer between Turkey and U.S.-allied Syrian opposition forces to ensure that neither side carries out attacks on the other.

A U.S. defense official said the force would also have the aim of preventing an ISIS resurgence in northeast Syria though it is not clear whether they would be involved in training or advising local forces as part of this effort.

The U.S. initially planned to only provide air support -- not ground troops -- to the observer force, but NATO allies objected and said they would not contribute troops toward such a mission without a U.S. troop commitment, the official said.

It became clear to U.S. officials on Monday that the observer force would never become a reality absent an American commitment of ground troops. After consulting with State and Defense Department officials, national security adviser John Bolton met with Trump on Thursday and convinced him to agree to commit "a couple hundred" troops, said a senior administration official, who briefed

a small group of reporters on Friday on the plans on condition of anonymity.

The defense official confirmed that Bolton convinced Trump to extend a U.S. presence on Thursday.

A U.S. official told CNN Thursday that the remaining U.S. troops will be able to provide unique high-end capabilities -- such as logistics, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and calling in airstrikes -- that would help encourage coalition countries like France and the United Kingdom to also keep their troops in Syria to help ensure the safe zone.

The decision ticks up the number of troops that Trump is agreeing to maintain in Syria after he hastily announced his plans to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria late last year, stunning U.S. officials and allies and triggering the resignation of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. U.S. officials and allies have sought to mitigate the risk to U.S.-allied Syrian opposition forces and to ensure that the U.S. can adequately respond to the potential resurgence of ISIS in the region.

Planning for the multinational observer force stems from an idea that Turkey proposed to Bolton and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford during a visit in January, amid concerns about the potential for conflict between Turkey and U.S.-backed Kurdish forces. The Joint Chiefs has since been leading discussions with NATO allies to assemble the force.

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Turkish officials have expressed concerns that U.S.-backed Kurdish forces would carry out terrorist attacks in Turkey, and the U.S.-backed forces have worried about the fret of a Turkish invasion.

Speaking prior to his meeting with Dunford and Shanahan Friday, Turkish Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar told reporters that they were "here to discuss policy issue in detail," saying that Turkey had no issue with the Syrian Kurds but that they did consider Kurdish militia groups backed by the U.S. to be linked to groups that Ankara views as terrorist organizations.

The senior administration official made clear that the observer force would not be a United Nations-chartered peacekeeping force and would not face the same restrictive rules of engagement that those forces face, but declined to elaborate on what those rules of engagement would be. The forces would, however, be combat-ready, the official said.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff are continuing to hammer out discussions with NATO allies, but given that a commitment of U.S. troops was the Europeans' main objection, U.S. officials are optimistic that this force will be assembled.

The senior administration official briefed reporters on Friday after White House press secretary Sarah Sanders issued a brief one-line statement asserting that "a small peace keeping group of about 200 will remain in Syria for a period of time." That figure did not take into account the presence of another 200 troops expected to remain at at-Tanf.

The defense official would not say how many troops are to remain in at-Tanf, but confirmed that the U.S. military would maintain a presence there as part of its effort to target ISIS remnants and prevent the terror group's resurgence.

U.S. officials hope the multinational force in northeastern Syria will minimize the risk of conflict between Turkey and U.S.-backed forces in Syria.

U.S. officials are aiming to withdraw most U.S. troops from Syria by April, but a senior administration official said Friday that date could shift depending on how quickly the multinational observer force is assembled.

(Source: agencies)

Palestinians enter sealed al-Aqsa area after 16 years

Palestinians worshippers have managed to gain access to the Israeli-restricted Bab al-Rahma area of the al-Aqsa Mosque in the occupied Old City of East Jerusalem al-Quds.

Thousands of worshippers, who gained access to the area on Friday, were responding to calls by Palestinian clerics -- including al-Aqsa Mosque's Mufti Ekrima Sa'id Sabri -- to gather in the Bab al-Rahma sector for Friday prayers, according to the Palestinian Information Center.

Bab al-Rahma, with a gate of the same name, consists of a large building and a courtyard that lie east of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

The building was sealed by Israeli authorities in 2003 after they claimed it was being used by Palestinians for political activities. Israeli authorities renewed the restriction order annually until an Israeli court ordered the building closed until further notice in 2017.

Israeli forces responded to the planned assembly on Friday by setting up numerous roadblocks and checkpoints and arresting up to 60 Palestinians, according to various local Palestinian sources.

The Israeli measures, however, failed to stop the crowd from opening the gate and entering the area for prayers.

Following the development, the Palestinian resistance movement of Hamas issued a statement describing the event as "a new peaceful victory against the Israeli occupation."

Tensions continue in the occupied Palestinian territories in the aftermath of a move by the United States to recognize Jerusalem al-Quds as Israel's "capital" and relocate its embassy to the occupied city.

The al-Aqsa Mosque compound is a flashpoint, highly respected by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike. The mosque is Islam's third holiest site after Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina.

(Source: Press TV)

More than 100 separatists detained in Kashmir raids in pre-election crackdown



More than 100 separatists in Kashmir were detained in overnight raids, police officials said on Saturday, as part of a crackdown on groups that might cause trouble ahead of nationwide elections set to be held by May.

The move comes days after a suicide car bombing killed at least 40 Indian security personnel on Feb. 14. The Indian government has warned that it will use all options in its power to avenge the attack claimed by Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed.

"The arrival of more troops and the arrests of leaders and activists of separatist groups is part of an election exercise undertaken to ensure free and fair elections," said one senior police official in the state.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party is set to seek re-election in nationwide polls that are due to be held by May.

"Anti-election campaigns will not be allowed and separatists will be detained to ensure free, fair and transparent elections in the state," the police official said.

Last week's attack has also raised tensions between nuclear-armed neighbors India and Pakistan, that both claim Kashmir in full but rule it in part. India blames Pakistan for harboring militant groups operating in Kashmir. Pakistan has repeatedly denied the allegation.

Following the attack, India retaliated by removing any trade privileges offered to Pakistan, and it is now preparing to send as many as ten thousand additional troops to the contested area, according to a letter from the country's home ministry seen by Reuters.

"India will exercise all instruments at its command, whether it is diplomatic or otherwise," India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said in New Delhi late on Friday. "This isn't a one-week battle. It's to be undertaken in various forms."

Islamabad in turn has warned it would respond with "full force" if attacked.

The overnight arrests in the state included those of many senior members of Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), an Islamic organization that wants Kashmir to be independent from India.

The arrests led to violent scenes in parts of Kashmir, with stone-throwing protesters met by police firing tear gas.

JeI's leader, Dr Abdul Hamid Fayaz and Yasin Malik, the head of Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) that wants independence from both India and Pakistan, were among those detained.

A spokesman for India's home ministry did not respond to a request for comment on the arrests or troop deployments.

Next week India's Supreme Court is also expected to hear a petition attempting to remove an article in the country's constitution that prevents non-residents from moving to Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian state that contains Muslim-majority Kashmir. If passed it could further escalate tensions in the region.

A spokesman for JeI said the arrests of its members were a "well designed ploy," ahead of any such ruling.

(Source: Reuters)

N. Korea's Kim: I don't want my children to bear burden of nuclear arms

Kim begins train journey to Hanoi for summit with Trump

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un told the U.S. secretary of state he did not want his children to live with the burden of nuclear weapons, a former CIA officer involved in high-level diplomacy over the North's weapons was quoted as saying on Saturday.

Kim made the rare personal comments to Mike Pompeo during a visit to the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, in April last year to lay the groundwork for the historic first summit between the North's leader and U.S. President Donald Trump in June in Singapore, former CIA official Andrew Kim said, South Korea's Yonhap news agency and the Wall Street Journal reported.

"I'm a father and a husband. And I have children'," Andrew Kim quoted the North Korean leader as telling Pompeo, when asked whether he was willing to end his nuclear program.

"And I don't want my children to carry the nuclear weapon on their back their whole life.' That was his answer," Andrew Kim told a lecture Friday at Stanford University's Asia Pacific Research Center, where he is a visiting scholar.

Before he retired from the CIA, Kim established the agency's Korea Mission Center, in April 2017, and accompanied Pompeo -- who was then CIA director -- to Pyongyang last year.

In their Singapore summit, Kim and Trump pledged to work towards peace between their countries and for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

But little progress has been made since then and they are set to meet again in Hanoi on Wednesday and Thursday. They are expected to focus on what steps North Korea might take towards denuclearization, in exchange for what U.S. concession.

The former CIA officer said the North Korean leader expressed a strong desire to improve ties with the United States as a way to build confidence between them, which he said was needed to end the nuclear weapons program.

The North Korean leader left Pyongyang by train for his visit to Vietnam on Saturday afternoon, Russia's TASS

news agency reported on Saturday citing a North Korean diplomatic source.

North Korea's state media has yet to confirm either Kim's trip to Vietnam or his summit with Trump.

■ Train journey to Hanoi

Kim Jong Un set off by train for Vietnam on Saturday, for his second summit with U.S. President Donald Trump next week, Russia's TASS news agency reported.

The report came hours after Vietnam announced that Kim would make an official visit in "coming days", as the Southeast Asian country prepares to host the summit with Trump on Wednesday and Thursday.

No details of the leaders' travel arrangements, or for the summit, have been officially released.

Trump and Kim will meet in the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, eight months after their historic summit in Singapore in June - the first between a sitting U.S. president and a North Korean leader - at which they pledged to work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

But progress has been scant since then.

The Trump administration has pressed North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program, which threatens the United States, before it can expect any concessions.

North Korea wants an easing of punishing U.S.-led sanctions, security guarantees and a formal end of the 1950-1953 Korean War, which ended in a truce, not a treaty.

Kim left the North Korean capital of Pyongyang at around 5 p.m. (0800 GMT) in an armored train, TASS said, citing a North Korean diplomatic source.

North Korea's state media has yet to confirm either Kim's trip to Vietnam or his summit with Trump.

It could take Kim at least two and a half days to travel the thousands of kilometers through China by train to Vietnam.

A senior security official in Vietnam told Reuters that Hanoi had been expecting a Vietnam-bound train to depart Pyongyang on Saturday, but did not know if Kim Jong Un



himself was on board.

Two sources with direct knowledge of security and logistics planning told Reuters on Wednesday that Vietnam was preparing for Kim to arrive by train.

His train is expected to stop at the Vietnamese border station of Dong Dang, where he will disembark and drive 170 km (105 miles) to Hanoi by car, the sources told Reuters.

Vietnamese police have stepped up security around the border station.

On Feb. 26, Vietnam will ban traffic on the road Kim is expected to take to Hanoi from a station on the Chinese border, state media said.

Travel by train has been a favorite mode of transport for Kim Jong Un, and his father, Kim Jong Il, and grandfather, Kim Il Sung.

In 1958, Kim Il Sung went from Pyongyang to Beijing by train, then flew from Beijing to Hanoi in a plane provided by China, South Korea's Yonhap News Agency reported on Saturday citing archived Chinese media reports.

(Source: agencies)

U.S., Russia to find ways to lift travel ban on Taliban leaders for peace talks

The United States and Russia have agreed to explore options on securing travel waivers for Taliban negotiators to participate in talks to end the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. peace envoy said ahead of a fresh round of peace talks scheduled on Monday.

Lifting the travel ban imposed over Taliban leaders by the United Nations has been one of the key demands of the hardline group that started negotiations with U.S. officials in 2018 to end the 17-year-old war.

U.S. special peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, who is leading the peace talks with the Taliban, discussed the issue of lifting the travel ban for Taliban leaders with his Russian counterpart Zamir Kabulov in Ankara on Friday.

"Amb (Ambassador) Kabulov and I also discussed travel barriers to talks. We will explore options for securing UN travel waivers for Taliban negotiators to participate in peace talks," he wrote on Twitter.

U.S. officials familiar with discussions said lifting the travel ban on some Taliban leaders could help accelerate the pace of ongoing negotiations.

The Afghan Taliban said it would resume negotiations on Monday with the United States in Qatar, insisting the meeting "will prove positive" despite propaganda against the peace process.

(Source: Reuters)

STOCK MARKET

| | |
|--------|----------|
| TEDPIX | 164267.8 |
| IFX | 2028.18 |

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

| | |
|-----|--------------|
| USD | 42,000 rials |
| EUR | 47,622 rials |
| GBP | 54,915 rials |
| AED | 11,437 rials |

Source: cbi.ir

COMMODITIES

| | |
|-------------|---------------|
| Brent | \$67.25/b |
| WTI | \$57.26/b |
| OPEC Basket | \$63.96/b |
| Gold | \$1,328.95/oz |
| Silver | \$15.97/oz |
| Platinum | \$847.95 oz |

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

Private sector should contribute to oil fields development: NIOC director

→ “The private sector can well handle a significant part of the government’s responsibilities in the oil industry,” he said, adding that this could be initiated with small projects and small fields, and then move to bigger projects.

Earlier in December 2018, the official had said that National Iranian Oil Company will transfer exploration projects for oil and gas fields to domestic companies.

“Plans are underway to award exploration projects to domestic companies now that the U.S. is putting pressure on foreign companies to operate in Iran”, Hendi said in a press conference.

NEWS IN BRIEF



‘Stable housing prices predicted for next year’

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— The housing market is predicted to witness stability in the next Iranian calendar year (begins on March 21, 2019), the head of National Property Advisers Union announced.

Mostafa Gholi Khosravi also announced that the number of real estate deals in Tehran has fallen 24 percent during the first eleven months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2018 – February 19, 2019) compared to the same period of time in the previous year, Tasnim news agency reported on Saturday.



Oil revenues share of budget resources grows in 9 months

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— According to the latest report of the economic department of Iran’s finance ministry, the share of oil revenues in supplying the required budget in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21- December 21, 2018) has increased, IRIB reported on Saturday.

“In comparison with the same time in the preceding year, share of oil revenues in supplying the pre-planned budget has increased by 40 percent in the said nine months,” the same report confirmed.

Turkey’s central bank posts \$10.7b net profit in 2018

The Central Bank of Turkey (CBRT) on Saturday announced it posted a net profit of nearly 56.3 billion Turkish liras (\$10.7 billion) in 2018.

The bank’s net profit surged over 200 percent year-on-year, up from some 18.4 billion liras (\$4.8 billion) in 2017.

According to the CBRT’s 87th accounting period balance sheet, the bank’s assets totaled 721.5 billion liras (\$137.2 billion), rising 13.2 percent on a yearly basis.

Gold assets in international standard amounted to 488.5 tons, worth 105.9 billion liras (\$20.1 billion) as of Dec. 31, 2018.

The U.S. dollar/Turkish lira exchange rate was 5.26 at the end of last year, versus 3.80 at the end of 2017.

Last month, the bank held an Extraordinary General Assembly Meeting to distribute 33.7 billion lira (\$6.3 billion) advance dividend to shareholders.

The CBRT’s General Assembly meeting is normally held in April, as the meeting was held in January to provide liquidity for the market earlier.

(Source: Hurriyet Daily)

Oil to be offered at IRENEX every week: Zanganeh

ENERGY **TEHRAN**— National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) will offer crude oil at Iran Energy Exchange (IRENEX) every week, Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh told Islamic Consultative Assembly News Agency (ICANA).

The minister said that it may take some time for selling crude oil at IRENEX to be common and regular, but the oil ministry will offer the product at this market every week.

NIOC offered crude oil at IRENEX first on October 28, just few days before new U.S. sanctions on Iran’s petroleum sector took effect (November 4). In the first round, NIOC could sell some 280,000 barrels of crude oil at \$74.85 per barrel. With the daily supply amount of one million barrels, the market wrapped up by selling eight 35,000-barrel-cargos of oil on the day.



The second round was on November 11 for offering 700,000 barrels of light crude oil at the price of \$76.29 per barrel.

NIOC offered one million barrels of light crude oil at IRENEX for the third time on January 21. The set price for that round of oil sale was \$52.42 per barrel.

The third round witnessed some advantages compared to the first and second rounds to facilitate purchase process for the applicants.

The fourth round of offering took place on February 4, when one million barrels of light crude oil was offered at the base price of \$56.24 per barrel and the least amount of sale was 35,000 barrels. This round ended with no deals.

Then on February 18, NIOC sold 35,000 barrels of light crude oil at IRENEX at the base price of \$52.25 per barrel for the fifth time.

Sierra Leone welcomes Iranian private sector investments

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— In a meeting between Ambassador of Sierra Leone to Tehran Alimamy Kamara and Head of Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) Masoud Khansari, the African envoy invited Iranian private sector to invest on his country’s education and health sectors, the portal of TCCIMA reported.

Iranian private sector can help Sierra Leone with expanding its health centers and equipping its hospitals, Kamara said, while the African country can improve its

exports of oil seeds and cacao as well as some minerals to Iran to boost mutual trade.

The TCCIMA head, for his part, voiced readiness of his private body for exchanging trade delegations with Sierra Leone for recognizing mutual cooperation potentials.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani received the letter of credence of the new Ambassador of Sierra Leone to Tehran in early February.

The Iranian president described the importance

of the development of close, friendly relations with African countries, especially Sierra Leone as the western gate to Africa for Iran, adding that “Iran and Sierra Leone can develop their relations and cooperation in different fields.”

He also said that the Iranian private sector is ready to deepen ties with Sierra Leone, stressing the development of relations and cooperation between Tehran and Freetown in health, medicine, and agriculture, Mehr news agency reported at the time.

‘Supportive package to be granted to expand exports by March 20’

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— A five-trillion-rial (above \$119 million) package is to be granted for backing exports from the country by the end of the present Iranian calendar year 1397 (March 20, 2019), IRIB quoted the acting head of Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) as saying on Saturday.

Making the remarks at the 2nd Iran’s International Exhibition and Conference of Exhibition Industry, Mohammadreza Modoudi called on the parliament to extend utilization of the provided 1397 supportive package to the next coming year on the way to back exports.

Mentioning Iran’s exports share



in the world, the official highlighted that the country has been successful in taking advantage of its capacities for exports.

European markets pinpoint just how bleak region’s economy is

Wherever you look in Europe’s financial markets, the signposts are pointing to the same thing: a pronounced slowdown in the region’s economy before the European Central Bank has even started to normalize interest rates since the last one.

While policy makers seem to hope that the dip might be a brief one, traders are sending out a starker message. Traditional metrics -- the euro and bund yields -- are hovering near multi-year lows, while inflation is expected to barely get off the ground over the course of the next 10 years, putting serious doubt on whether the ECB can hike rates anytime soon.

■ ECB Pushback

Traders in money markets are pushing expectations for a hike further into 2020.

Axa Investment Managers, which oversees 759 billion euros (\$860 billion), has a long position in 30-year bunds, benefiting from economic pessimism. For Citigroup Inc. too, flagging inflation means the bund rally may have room to extend while for Societe Generale SA, the euro is still overvalued on a trade-weighted basis, despite it being one of the worst performers this year.

Potential fracture points for the region’s economy abound. Its third-biggest economy, Italy, slipped into recession in the second half of last year while its powerhouse Germany only just avoided it. Political stumbling blocks also litter the landscape, with the contraction in Italy putting more pressure on its fledgling government and its investment-grade credit rating, and European Parliamentary elections could herald a populist wave in May.

Here’s what markets are saying about the region:

■ Inflation

Inflation may be tepid now, clocking in at just 1.4 percent in the year through January, but the outlook may be even more concerning for the ECB. A gauge based on derivative prices shows the five-year inflation rate will be just 1.45 percent five years from now, well below the ECB’s target of less than, but close to, 2 percent.

That will likely keep bunds near their recent highs, according to Citigroup analysts led by Jamie Searle. There is no sign of the reflation that spawned a 90-basis-point “tantrum” in the securities in 2015.

“Five-year, five-year inflation was the early warning signal for the tantrum and it’s not moving,” the strategists wrote in a note. “That means the rally probably isn’t over.”

■ Rate expectations

In short, interest-rate expectations have collapsed over the last six months. Traders are not pricing the first ECB rate hike since 2011 until June next year, while many in the market are betting that the institution won’t be able to raise rates at all before the next recession.

(Source: CNBC)

Second Announcement

IN THE NAME OF GOD

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN BROADCASTING

INTERNATIONAL TENDER NO. 97-11/202

Tender Holder:
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN BROADCASTING (IRIB)

Subject of Two-Stage Tender:
Purchasing HEVC Headend Equipment according to the tender documents

Deadline of Receiving Documents:
As of publishing second announcement of advertisement latest by the business hour dated on **Wednesday February 27, 2019.**

Place of Receiving Documents:
Secretariat of Tenders’ Commission, Technical Purchasing (KALA) Dept., Media Technology and Development Deputy Office, Bldg. No. 2, IRIB, Jam-e Jam St., Vali-e Asr Ave., Tehran

Type and Amount of Guarantee for Participating in Tender:
The amount of **USD 39,900** which should be in the form of extendable bank guarantee

Time and Place of Delivering Priced Bid:
The sealed A, B & C packages/envelopes should be submitted within one main envelope marked with tender number no later than **15 p.m. on Monday April 15, 2019** and submitted to the Secretariat of Commission of Tenders.

Time and Place of Opening Envelopes
The date of opening envelopes A&B is at **8:30 a.m. on Wednesday April 17, 2019** in the office of Vice President of IRIB Planning and Financial Resources and opening of envelope C will be after technical evaluation.
It should be noted that bidders should hold license from the authorized bodies.

For more information, please contact the following phone numbers: **0098-21-22166313**
It is obvious that cost of publishing two advertisements shall be borne by the winner of tender.

Public Relations Dept. of IRIB

New oil and gas project investment set to triple in 2019's stable climes

The energy market can expect a surge in oil and gas project approvals in 2019, as operators in the sector are playing catch-up to clear final investment decisions (FIDs) on endeavors that were put on ice in the wake of the 2015 crude price slump.

With Brent, the global proxy benchmark, oscillating in a range-bound \$60-70 per barrel bracket, projections put forward by Rystad Energy suggest FIDs this year on new petroleum projects worldwide could see sanctioned volumes of oil and gas – excluding shale and tight oil and gas prospects – nearly triple compared to last year's tally.

The Oslo, Norway-headquartered global energy industry research and analysis firm reckons collective volumes could swell past 46 billion barrels of oil equivalent (boe). There are three main factors driving this growth in 2019, it adds.

For starters, following the 2014-15 crude price crash, operators hit the drawing boards to try to make their projects fly at lower prices, resulting in project delays. "Now they are starting to play catch-up. These delayed projects can make up almost a quarter of the FID volumes in 2019," says Readul Islam, Research Analyst at Rystad Energy.

Secondly, as demand for cleaner fuels rises, the threat of an LNG undersupply developing by the mid-2020s is likely to spur sanctions for natural gas projects in Africa, Australia, the Middle East and Russia. LNG projects



make up a third of the estimated FID volumes this year.

Finally, Saudi Arabia "appears likely" to greenlight three major offshore shelf expansion projects that would collectively account for nearly a fifth of global FID volumes in 2019.

"Put it all together, and we expect global FID volumes in 2019 to triple over last year, and 2019's megaproject awards could lead to

billions of subcontracting dollars in coming years," Islam adds.

"The only supply segment likely to shrink this year is the oil sands, whereas deepwater, offshore shelf and other conventional onshore developments are all poised to show substantial growth. From a geographical perspective, all regions are headed for robust growth except Europe and North America, still bearing in mind that shale plays are not

included in these numbers."

While 2019 is poised to be a bumper year, Rystad Energy data indicates that FID levels have been gradually improving. Things got off to a good start in the first half of 2018 and were on track to outpace the tally for 2017, but several project deferrals during the fourth quarter – coinciding with a steep drop in oil prices – prevented that from happening.

However, there are downside risks to this forecast. "This year's harvest of FIDs are incredibly top-heavy: delays to a few megaprojects currently expected to be approved in the second half of 2019 could turn the volume down significantly," cautions Islam.

And Rystad Energy does not expect that the 2019 FID surge will result in a proportionate increase in contracting opportunities for the oilfield service (OFS) sector. When considering fields of 25 million boe and above, which account for more than 97 percent of the forecast volume, there is an increase of less than 12 percent to the 2019 FID count in relation to the number of individual projects sanctioned in 2018.

"The silver lining for many suppliers as they navigate an ultra-competitive landscape is that the huge projects sanctioned during 2019 will generate contracts worth billions of dollars for facilities and services in the years to follow," Islam concludes.

(Source: Forbes)

Exxon to use Microsoft tech to boost Permian oil output, profitability

ExxonMobil has forged a digital partnership with Microsoft to use cloud technology to increase oil production and profitability in its key growth area, the Permian, the U.S. oil supermajor said on Friday.

Under the deal with Microsoft, Exxon will use an integrated cloud environment that securely and reliably collects real-time data from oil field assets spanning hundreds of miles. The data will enable ExxonMobil to make faster and better decisions on drilling optimization, well completions, and prioritization of personnel deployment, the oil giant said.

According to Exxon, the partnership will make its Permian operations the largest-ever oil and gas acreage to use cloud technology. The application of the cloud technology is expected to generate billions of U.S. dollars in net cash flow for Exxon over the next decade, as data analysis and operational efficiencies improve.

The partnership has the potential to expand Exxon's production in the Permian by 50,000 oil-equivalent barrels a day by 2025.

"Through our partnership with Microsoft, we're combining our technical and engineering expertise with cloud and data analytics capabilities to develop the Permian resource in the most capital-efficient



manner," said Staale Gjervik, senior vice president, Permian Integrated Development for Exxon.

Exxon's unconventional production in the Permian continued to ramp up in the fourth quarter of 2018, the supermajor said earlier this month, noting that production surged by more than 90 percent from the same quarter of 2017.

Exxon's total global liquids production in Q4 rose by 4 percent from prior-year quarter, driven by growth in the Permian. Oil-equivalent production was 4.010 million bpd in Q4, exceeding 4 million bpd for the first time in nearly two years. A major growth driver of production came from the Permian, where Exxon plans to triple its production by 2025 to more than 600,000 oil-equivalent barrels.

(Source: CNBC)

Nord Stream 2 created 30,000 new jobs in Europe: chamber of commerce

The construction of the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline has created 30,000 jobs in Europe, the German-Russian Chamber of Commerce said in a statement Thursday.

"Over the past five years, the EU's largest infrastructure project to date has created 30,000 new jobs in Europe," the statement said.

Over 70 percent of German nationals welcome Nord Stream 2, as the pipeline would reduce prices for gas and electric energy.

"Apart from companies, European households and ordinary consumers will also feel a decrease in gas and electricity prices after the Nord Stream 2 project is implemented. German population appreciates these advantages. According to a poll on Nord Stream 2 conducted by the Forsa Public Opinion Institute in January this year, 73 percent of Germans support construction of the gas pipeline and only 16 percent reject it," the chamber said in a statement.

The German-Russian Chamber of Commerce supported the consistent implementation of the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline, a statement released by the business community on Thursday said.

"In the discussion around the Nord Stream 2 project, the German-Russian



Chamber of Commerce, representing more than 850 member companies,... stands for consistent construction and timely commissioning of the gas pipeline," the statement said.

It said the companies involved in the Nord Stream-2 project insisted that the existing agreements on the project must remain in force.

The Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture between the Russian company Gazprom, Engie of France, OMV of Austria, the Anglo-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell, as well as the Germany companies Uniper and Wintershall.

The project aims to deliver 55 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas per year to the European Union via the Baltic Sea, bypassing Ukraine.

(Source: Sputnik)

Permian producers face diverging outlook for oil, gas in 2019

Producers in the Permian Basin are getting mixed signals from midstream markets in 2019, as increasingly unconstrained crude oil production continues to lift associated gas output to record highs, testing the limits of available takeaway capacity for the fuel.

The startup of Plains All American Pipeline's 350,000 b/d Sunrise expansion at the end of 2018 marked the start of a period that should bring higher prices and more takeaway capacity for Permian crude.

As oil production bottlenecks are eliminated, though, associated gas output is growing. According to S&P Global Platts Analytics, production averaging nearly 8.9 Bcf/d over the past month is now just below the capacity of available pipelines and local demand to absorb it.

As Permian producers respond to market signals that should drive increased crude production in 2019, prices for oil and gas are likely to continue diverging, at least through the summer months.

Crude

Already this year, crude producers are seeing stronger prices and more capacity on the horizon.

With the startup of projects like Plains' Sunrise expansion, the discount held by WTI locked in at the Midland Permian hub compared with barrels at the Magellan East Houston hub has narrowed to \$7.82/b in the first quarter from \$12.71/b in the fourth quarter, S&P Global Platts data shows.

Crude oil takeaway pipeline capacity from the Permian to the U.S. Gulf Coast is growing too.

According to Platts Analytics, about 3 million b/d is expected online in the next 18 months, bringing total takeaway capacity to about 6 million b/d by 2020.

Based on announced projects, forecasts



by Platts Analytics show takeaway-pipeline capacity exceeding Permian production by 1 million b/d by 2020, which has some project stakeholders fearing overbuild and considering merging projects. At risk is the Permian Gulf Coast pipeline, announced by Energy Transfer Partners, Magellan, MPLX and Delek, which could be joined with the 1 million b/d ExxonMobil, Plains, and Lotus Midstream project.

Gas

The contrasting outlook for gas could not be more stark. Earlier this month, gas prices at Waha settled at a record-low 7 cents/MMBtu, as Permian gas production surged to its highest ever 9.2 Bcf/d, S&P Global Platts data shows.

According to Platts Analytics, Permian gas production becomes fully constrained around 9.4 Bcf/d, considering that effective takeaway capacity on pipelines exiting the

basin is about 8.7 Bcf/d, with local demand capable of absorbing another 700 MMcf/d.

Until Kinder Morgan's 2 Bcf/d Gulf Coast Express expansion comes online in October, price volatility is likely to increase as available capacity for production growth remains limited.

In the meantime, one potential outlet for Permian gas production could come from the Wahalajara pipeline system in Mexico. While the project has been subject to previous delays, it is expected to bring online up to 400 MMcf/d in incremental demand by May, allowing more supply to move from the Permian Basin to existing capacity at the Texas border.

Outlook

As Permian producers target new markets for future crude production growth, they'll need to keep a close eye on near-term prices, production and capacity in

the gas market.

Many U.S. Gulf Coast refiners are now reaching maximum light, sweet capacity, meaning that much of the crude production increases from the Permian will be destined for the export market, which averaged 2.3 million bpd in November 2018, data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration shows.

Fears that export facilities will not be able to keep up are reflected in the wider price spread between ICE WTI MEH barrels and its global benchmark Brent to \$3.55/b a year from now, from the current front-month \$2.33/b spread.

In the gas market, volatile prices and constraints could be on the horizon during the approaching shoulder season.

For April and May, forward prices at Waha are now trading in the upper 90 cents/MMBtu range, which is down from prices in the low \$1.20s/MMBtu, about six months ago, S&P Global Platts data shows.

Beyond October, though, forward markets are pricing Permian gas higher with the peak-winter demand month of January now priced at \$2.40/MMBtu.

Next year, Permian producers can look forward to more capacity growth for gas, which should come from Kinder's second expansion project, the Permian Highway Pipeline, which will add another 2.1 Bcf/d in takeaway capacity for the basin.

On the crude side, producers will keep a watchful eye on a construction project to replace Corpus Christi bridge with a taller one, which should allow larger crude tankers in and out of the port there. According to recent construction reports, that project is now behind schedule, and is unlikely to meet the April 2020 deadline.

(Source: Platts)

What oil-tanker rates can tell traders about OPEC members' compliance with cuts

Savvy oil traders keep an eye on the cost of moving crude via tankers for myriad clues to the underlying supply and demand picture. But one analyst is warning investors not to get fooled into thinking that a bounce in one closely watched rate is a signal that OPEC producers are surreptitiously loosening the spigots.

Michael Tran, a commodity analyst at RBC Capital Markets, noted Thursday that day rates for tankers known as very large crude carriers, or VLCC, to move crude from the Persian Gulf to Asia fell from nearly \$60,000 a day in the fourth quarter of last year to a low of \$15,000 a day earlier this month. That was no shock given that an agreement by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies to cut output took effect in January.

The rate is one that can be watched for a "loose" indication of how well members of OPEC are complying with production measures, he said. So it's no surprise that a bounce off that low back to around \$30,000 a day this week (see chart above) triggered "knee jerk" thoughts that compliance was slipping, particularly with Iraqi exports surging to nearly 4 million barrels a day in early February, up around 230,000 barrels a day from the same time last year. Iraq, along with Libya, Iran and Venezuela, are exempt from the OPEC cuts.

But check that thought, Tran said, as it appears compliance overall remains relatively high. A monitoring committee set up by OPEC and its allies found compliance with the cuts at 83 percent, Reuters reported on Wednesday, though not everyone is impressed by how well participants are sticking to the deal.

Meanwhile, the efforts by producers, particularly Saudi Arabia, have been seen contributing to a rally that's seen Brent crude LCOJ9, -0.24 percent the global benchmark, jump by around 25 percent since the end of last year, while the U.S. benchmark, West Texas Intermediate crude CLJ9, +0.19 percent has risen around 26 percent.

So why the bounce in VLCC rates? Tran said it looks like more ships are running empty in an effort to capitalize on a U.S. export boom.

He said so-called channel checks – the practice of collecting data from a company's customers, suppliers, employees and even rivals to gauge the health of a business – with physical shipping contacts "have suggested that rallying rates are a function of vessels leaving the Middle East due to lack of work and traveling empty en route to the U.S. Gulf as the region gears up for an elevated degree of exports."

(Source: Market Watch)

Saudis signal allure of China with \$10 billion refinery deal

Saudi Arabia reaffirmed its interest in the Chinese market with a deal to build a \$10 billion refining and petrochemicals complex as it vies for crude-oil customers with fellow OPEC members and Russia.

Saudi Arabian Oil Co., or Aramco, agreed to set up a joint venture with two Chinese companies to develop the facility in Liaoning province, according to a statement Friday. Saudi Arabia is investing in energy assets across Asia, the world's biggest oil-consuming region, as it battles for market share.

The kingdom will supply as much as 70 percent of the crude needed by the new complex, which will include a 300,000-barrel-a-day refinery, an ethylene cracker and a paraxylene unit, the statement shows. The deal, signed while Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is in Beijing, follows recent Saudi pledges to fund projects in India and Pakistan, as well as agreements to invest in South Korea's Hyundai Oilbank Co. and a petrochemical complex in Malaysia.

The slew of Asian partnerships formed by state-run Aramco comes as Saudi Arabia plays catch-up with Russia, which has topped the kingdom in oil sales to China in the past couple of years.

The Saudis will team up with China North Industries Group Corp., or Norinco, and Panjin Sincen to form an entity called Huajin Aramco Petrochemical Co., according to Friday's statement. The project is expected to start operations in 2024.

"Our agreement today with Norinco and the Liaoning province is a clear demonstration of Saudi Aramco's strategy to move from beyond a buyer-seller relationship, to one where we can make significant investments to contribute to China's economic growth and development," Chief Executive Officer Amin Nasser said.

Saudi Aramco will take a 35 percent stake in the new company, while Norinco and Panjin Sincen will hold 36 percent and 29 percent, respectively. The ethylene facility will have an annual capacity of 1.5 million tons and the paraxylene unit, 1.3 million tons.

Aramco also plans to establish a fuel-retail business in China, according to the statement. By the end of 2019, a "three-party marketing JV" is expected to be formed between the Saudi company, North Huajin and Liaoning Transportation Construction Investment Group Co. to develop a filling-stations network, it said.

An initial framework agreement for the Liaoning refinery was signed during Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz's visit to Beijing in 2017. Then in October last year, the Saudis said they would also acquire a share of a 400,000-barrel-a-day plant on Zhoushan island in Zhejiang province, and committed to supplying the Rongsheng Group-run refinery with a portion of its crude requirements.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Rig count falls as U.S. oil production hits all-time high

The number of active oil and gas rigs fell in the United States this week according to Baker Hughes, despite record-breaking production for the week ending February 15.

The total number of active oil and gas drilling rigs fell by 4 rigs, according to the report, with the number of active oil rigs falling by 4 to reach 853 and the number of gas rigs holding fast at 194.

The oil and gas rig count is now 69 up from this time last year, 54 of which is in oil rigs.

Oil prices were trading up earlier on Friday on lowered OPEC production and hopes that the relentless trade spat between China and the United States might drawing to a close. The strong bearish signal came from the United States on Thursday, with the Energy Information Administration showing that production reached 12 million barrels per day for the week ending February 15—months ahead of what the EIA originally had thought, and 100,000 barrels per day over production from the previous week.

Despite the onslaught of US oil production, prices held, and at 12:21pm, WTI was trading up 0.81% (+\$0.46) at \$57.42, while Brent was trading up 0.30% (+\$0.20) at \$67.39—an increase for both benchmarks week on week as well.

Canada's oil and gas rigs saw an even bigger decrease in the number rigs this week. Canada's total oil and gas rig count fell by 12 rigs and is now 212, which is 94 fewer rigs than this time last year.

By 1:06pm EDT, WTI was trading up 0.65% (+\$0.37) at \$57.33 on the day. Brent crude was trading up 0.12% (+\$0.08) at \$67.27 per barrel, with both benchmarks trading up significantly week on week.

(Source: oilprice.com)

NEWS IN BRIEF

**India invited to OIC's session in Abu Dhabi**

INTERNATIONAL DESK **TEHRAN** — In a significant development, India has been invited as the 'guest of honor' in a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Abu Dhabi early next month.

Indian government has called the invitation a "welcome recognition" of the presence of 185 million Muslims in India. India has the largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia.

Quoting official sources, state-run news agency PTI said foreign minister Sushma Swaraj will attend the 46th session of the OIC's council of foreign ministers to be held in Abu Dhabi from March 1 to 2.

"We see this invitation as the desire of the enlightened leadership of the UAE to go beyond our rapidly growing close bilateral ties and forge a true multifaceted partnership at the multilateral and international level" India's foreign ministry said in a statement.

Last year, Bangladesh had proposed restructuring of the charter of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to pave way for the inclusion of non-Muslim countries like India as an 'observer state' of the 50-year old organization.

**FATF retains Pakistan on its 'grey list'**

INTERNATIONAL DESK **TEHRAN** — In another setback for the government in Islamabad, Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has retained Pakistan on its 'grey list', citing 'limited progress'.

The Paris-based terror financial watchdog said the country has made only "limited progress" in curbing terror financing and failed to comprehend risks posed by groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

The FATF urged Pakistan to address its deficiencies adequately, including the "demonstration of the effective implementation of targeted financial sanctions" against UN-designated terrorists.

The decision comes in the wake of the deadliest terror attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir less than a fortnight ago, carried out by JeM, which killed at least 44 security personnel. Following the attack, Indian government had vowed to isolate Pakistan diplomatically and urged FATF to 'blacklist' the country.

FATF's statement came a day after the UN Security Council, in a statement, condemned the 14 February suicide attack. The statement named the Pakistan-based JeM.

Tensions between the two countries have been running high, with Indian government vowing 'a befitting reply' and the Pakistani army saying it will respond to any Indian reprisal with 'full force'.

**Separatists arrested in Kashmir in overnight raids**

INTERNATIONAL DESK **TEHRAN** — Situation continues to be tense in Indian-controlled Kashmir with more than 100 separatist leaders and activists detained in overnight raids, sources said on Saturday.

The raids are seen as part of the crackdown by Indian authorities to prevent anti-India gatherings and protests in the run up to general elections in India two months later.

"The arrival of more troops and the arrests of leaders and activists of separatist groups is part of an election exercise undertaken to ensure free and fair elections," one senior police official was quoted as saying by Reuters.

It is the first major crackdown on the separatist leadership in the disputed region, which comes a week after a terror attack in south Kashmir's Pulwama district, which killed 44 Indian security personnel.

An appeal has been filed in Supreme Court to repeal the legislation, which has stirred tensions in the Himalayan region, with politicians cutting across the political spectrum protesting against it.

Terming the arrests 'arbitrary', region's former chief minister Mehbooba Mufti said it will only precipitate the situation in Jammu and Kashmir.

"Under what legal grounds are their arrests justified? You can imprison a person but not his ideas," she tweeted.

**China to form 'contact group' on Afghanistan**

INTERNATIONAL DESK **TEHRAN** — As hectic efforts are underway to facilitate peace in war-ravaged Afghanistan, China has stepped up efforts to play the role of a peacemaker.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi has said that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will form a contact group to help facilitate political settlement in Afghanistan and put an end to the protracted war.

His remarks came in a meeting with his Kyrgyz counterpart Chingiz Aidaibekov in Beijing on Thursday, according to reports. China, like other countries in the region, has hosted talks between the Taliban and various other stakeholders in recent past. Seen as a counterweight to United States in the region, China is an important player in the peace process as it enjoys good relations with both the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Meanwhile, despite Beijing's growing interest in regions neighboring Afghanistan, China is unlikely to be interested in replacing the U.S. military's role in maintaining stability in the war-torn country, Sputnik quoted an Afghan expert saying. Instead of boosting its military presence in Afghanistan, China has opted to play a more active role in peace negotiations in the country, said Mariam Safi, director of DROPS based in Kabul.

India threatens to stop flow of water to Pakistan; Islamabad 'not concerned'

INTERNATIONAL DESK **TEHRAN** — The heightened tensions between two warring neighbors India and Pakistan in the wake of recent terrorist attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir have drifted towards waters now.

India has threatened to stop the flow of water to Pakistan and divert it to northern states of Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab.

Minister for water resources Nitin Gadkari created a stir on Thursday by saying that New Delhi was planning to build projects on three rivers flowing into Pakistan, to divert water towards Yamuna.

"Our government has decided to stop our share of water which used to flow to Pakistan. We will divert water from eastern rivers and supply it to our people in Jammu and Kashmir, and Punjab," he tweeted.

The statement provoked debate as many observers in New Delhi said the move was not feasible.

Under the Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 and brokered by the World Bank, India shares water of Beas and Sutlej rivers with Pakistan. It gave India "unrestricted use" of the eastern rivers – Sutlej, Ravi and Beas while giving Pakistan unrestricted use of the western rivers – Chenab, Jhelum and Indus.

The treaty came after India in 1948 had cut off water supply from Sutlej, which flowed across the border into Pakistan, threatening agriculture in that country.

Earlier at an event in northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Gadkari had said that the water from three rivers entering Pakistan would be diverted towards Yamuna River.

He said the government was working on a project to connect three rivers to further explore possibilities of transportation in them.



"Three of our rivers have been flowing into Pakistan. So water which we rightfully owned was going into Pakistan. Now we are planning to create a project and divert the waters of these three rivers to the Yamuna. So you can understand that there will be enough water in the Yamuna," Gadkari said.

A day after his statement, India's water resources ministry issued details of various projects being worked upon to enforce it.

However, a senior official in the ministry, said it was not a "new decision" and that the minister was "simply reiterating" what he (Gadkari) had always said.

Meanwhile, Pakistan said it was not concerned over the plan to stop the flow of its share of water to Pakistan from Ravi, Sutlej and Beas rivers under the Indus Water Treaty.

A senior official from Pakistan's ministry of water resources was quoted saying by Dawn that they have "neither concern nor objection" if India diverts water of eastern rivers and supplies it to its people or uses it for other purposes, "as the IWT allows it to do so".

"Actually India wants to construct Shahpurkandi dam at the Ravi basin. This project is abandoned since 1995. Now they (India) want to construct this in a bid to use its own share of water that goes unutilised and finally flows to Pakistan. So if they want to use this whether through storing it, through construction of this dam or any other way for their people, they can do as we have nothing to do with it," the official said.

"But we will definitely express our concerns and raise objections strongly if they use

Pakistan a pawn in Saudi's sinister game

1 → Khan, who had campaigned vigorously against his predecessor's flawed economic policies, found himself in the same situation. He faced many uphill tasks, most notably reviving the embattled economy through immediate and long term reforms and dealing with the scourge of extremist organizations and terrorist groups operating in the country.

Farahnaz Ispahani, a former Pakistani MP and Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, in an interview with Tehran Times that time said the new government needed to "break out of its cycles of boom and bust but for that serious reform, not gimmicks and temporary solutions, are needed".

However, instead of focusing on real reforms, Khan followed the same beaten track. His government secretly approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout, and sought financial help from China and Saudi Arabia.

While China has a massive economic project going on in Pakistan, as part of the Belt and Road initiative, Saudis doling out money to Pakistan was interesting. They saw an opportunity beckoning them and they grabbed it with both hands.

Without knowing, the new Pakistan government had traded its sovereignty for Saudi petro dollars.

During his first overseas trip to Riyadh after assuming power, Khan underscored that Riyadh will remain a priority for Pakistan's foreign policy. Thus, he kept alive the tradition of his predecessors.

Khan said Riyadh had "always stood with Pakistan in difficult times and the Pakistani government and its people highly acknowledge it." As an acknowledgement of his loyalty, Saudi regime announced \$6 billion in financial support to Islamabad.

Those who were expecting a nuanced and balanced approach to Islamabad's relations with Tehran and Riyadh under Imran Khan were left disillusioned.

Saudi's financial support to Pakistan has less to do with its 'friendship' with Islamabad and more to do with its own sinister agendas. It has to be seen in the context of its global outsourcing of Wahhabi ideology and sponsorship of extremist groups in various countries affiliated to that ideology. It has to be seen in the context of its rivalry with Iran and its continuous efforts to destabilize Iran.

Pakistan is one of the countries where radical groups affiliated to the Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi ideology are found in large numbers. Under this diabolical project, many madrasas (schools) are being run, where youth are indoctrinated to join armed insurgent groups like Jaish e Adl, a little-known terrorist group operating out of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, bordering Iran.

This particular terrorist group has been involved in many terrorist attacks inside Iran. The latest and one of the deadliest attacks came earlier this month in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, which killed at least 27 members of Iran's revolutionary corps (IRGC). The attack was carried out by a Pakistani national.

Following the deadly attack, Iranian generals without mincing words urged the Pakistani leadership to crack down on the terror group. Pakistan offered cooperation but denied



involvement in the attack.

The attack coincided with another attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir, a disputed territory claimed by both India and Pakistan. While his country was facing the heat from two of its important neighbors, Pakistan's prime minister was busy rolling the red carpet for the patron of these terrorist groups – Saudi Arabia's crown prince.

During his visit to Pakistan, Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) announced \$20 billion investment deals, including \$10 billion refinery and oil complex in Gwadar, a port city in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province close to Iran border.

The project, according to observers, will give Saudi firm foothold in the restive Baluchistan province of Pakistan, which will aid in its efforts to destabilize neighboring Iran.

Taha Siddiqui, a senior Pakistani journalist, in an Al Jazeera column wrote that the Saudis were "using aid packages and investment promises to buy the economically embattled Pakistani government's loyalty and convince it to turn a blind eye to their destructive actions within Pakistan's borders."

The writing was on the wall: In lieu of petrodollars, Pakistan not only put its sovereignty at stake but risked losing friendship of neighbors like Iran.

Pakistani officials have long argued that Islamabad has limited control over these terrorist groups and they mainly operate under the command of the country's powerful and notorious intelligence agency ISI, which again shows the fault line between the civilian and military leadership in Pakistan. However, there is agreement that the civilian leadership in Pakistan has knowledge about terrorist sanctuaries in the country but it continues to live in denial.

Some even say that since Khan was helped by the military leadership in elections, it would be nearly impossible for him to take a position against these militant groups.

Pakistan's military has traditionally favored stronger ties with Arab countries, paying less attention closer home. Although in last few years, it had cozied up to Iran but Saudi's petrodollars turned the tide again in favor of Riyadh.

While Pakistan's military, according to observers, has used these militant groups for proxy wars against India and Afghani-

stan, it has allowed groups like Jaish e Adl to flourish in region bordering Iran on the instructions from Riyadh.

Yet, it has always rejected involvement in attacks inside India mostly carried out by Jaish e Mohammad and Lashkar e Toiba, it has rejected complicity in attacks inside Afghanistan perpetrated by Afghan Taliban and it refuses to accept culpability in attacks inside Iran carried out by Jaish e Adl. It is widely acknowledged that all these groups have bases in Pakistan.

A Pakistan-based analyst speaking to Tehran Times said these groups certainly operate under the jurisdiction of ISI but the civilian leadership should know that accepting billions of dollars from Saudi rulers is akin to inviting trouble.

"When Imran Khan government gave MBS red carpet welcome and proudly accepted his investment deals, including in Baluchistan province, they should have known the motive of Riyadh, which is basically to use Pakistani territory to destabilize neighboring Iran," he said, wishing anonymity.

The popular opinion in Pakistan is overwhelmingly against Pakistan's tilt towards Saudi Arabia, as it is being seen as counter-productive to Pakistan's own strategic interests.

"By strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia and accepting billions of petrodollars, we are not only embracing Saudi royals but also those dreaded terrorist groups who carry out attacks inside Pakistan and in its neighborhood," said Ishtiaq Hussain, a student at Quad e Azam University, Islamabad.

"It is time for the government to accept that these terrorist groups have sanctuaries inside our country and they are patronized by our military-intelligence leadership," he said.

Mubashir Hussain, an Islamabad-based researcher, commenting on the latest statement of IRGC Quds brigade chief Gen. Qasem Soleimani said it should serve as a 'wake-up call' for the Imran Khan government.

"I think most Pakistanis would endorse Gen. Soleimani's statement that Pakistan should not be subservient to Saudi interests because of petro dollars, it should take care of its borders and ensure Saudi money does not breed terrorism inside Pakistan," he told Tehran Times.

Gen. Soleimani issued a terse statement on Thursday, cautioning Pakistan of Saudi's true intentions behind billion dollars investment, saying the Kingdom is hell-bent on destroying Pakistan's relations with its neighbors.

"Can't you, as a nuclear-armed state, deal with a hundreds-strong terrorist group in the region," General Soleimani asked the Pakistani government.

"Iran is a safe neighbor for Pakistan and we will not threaten this country, but we will exact revenge against the Takfiri mercenaries, who have the blood of our youths on their hands no matter where in the world they are," he warned.

Before General Soleimani, military aide to the Iranian Leader Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi also lashed out at ISI's sponsorship of terrorists, telling Islamabad that Saudi Arabia was not a reliable partner.

He further said that evidence points to the backing of these terrorist groups by a number of Persian Gulf Arab states, including Saudi Arabia.



Analysis of MBS's trip to three Asian countries

1 → Thus, MBS's trip to Pakistan, India and China is to:

-Improve Riyadh's trade with India to influence India's import of Iran oil and Pakistan's gas deal with Iran. Saudi Arabia intends to jack up its oil export to India, Pakistan and China to replace Iran's oil which has been limited by the U.S. sanctions. MBS plans to exacerbate economic pressure on Iran by giving privileges and oil guarantees to these countries on behalf of Washington.

-MBS tries to restore his battered image and political isolation after the murder of Khashoggi, particularly in countries reluctant to accept him such as Malaysia and Indonesia. In other words, he plans to overcome a bottleneck with Saudi petrodollars, while it is still unclear whether his promises will be realized or not.

He tries to convey to the West and the U.S. that the Saudis also have an eye for the eastern market and not just the western markets. In other words, Riyadh's after balancing out interest

in both markets.

Saudi Arabia is in a secret competition with Qatar especially after they broke ties with Doha, and now, they try to snatch the Asian markets.

The effective role of economy in international relations. The praise and warm welcome MBS received from Pakistani and Indian prime ministers prove the important role of economy in the relationships between Saudi Arabia with these two states and how economy overshadows politics.

Kushner is behind sending sensitive U.S. nuclear tech to Saudi: Askari

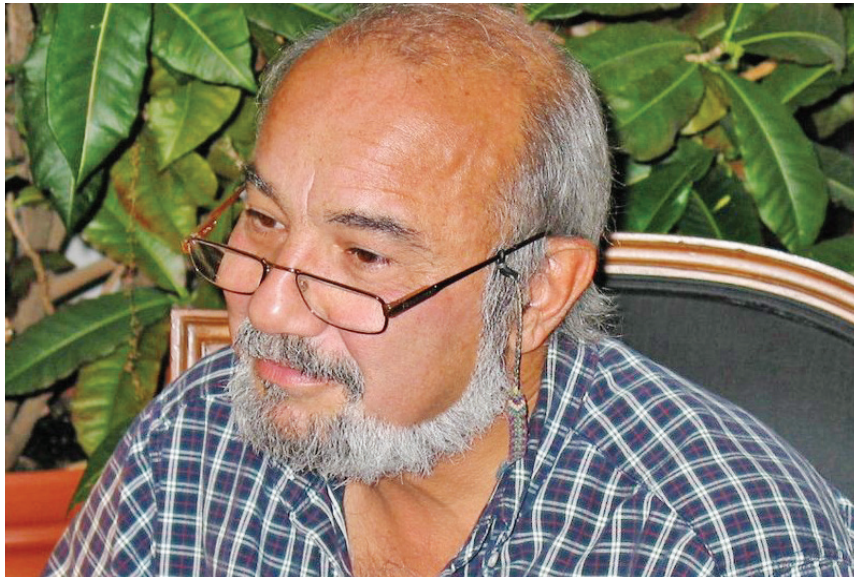
1 → Following is the text of the interview:

■ Top Trump administration officials advocated a plan to build dozens of nuclear power plants in Saudi Arabia despite warnings that the move could pose ethical concerns and violate federal law, according to a report released by House Democrats. Which group in U.S. has been trying to sell this sensitive technology to Saudi Arabia?

A: I think that the origin of this initiative was General Flynn, the disgraced first National Security Advisor to Donald Trump. But now I think that MBS has followed up on this with Jared Kushner. So today, I believe the main advocate for this are Kushner, U.S. nuclear power plant builders, such as Westinghouse and General Electric, and possibly Donald Trump's sons. This is all about money. It is that simple.

■ Democrats raise concerns that the Trump administration support for this effort would allow the Saudi regime access to "sensitive U.S. nuclear technology" that could in turn "allow Saudi Arabia to produce nuclear weapons that contribute to the proliferation of nuclear arms throughout an already unstable Middle East." What is your opinion?

A: Yes, this would allow Saudi Arabia to produce nuclear weapons. But there is more. This is not Saudi Arabia's best option. I believe that Saudi Arabia could buy two or so nuclear warheads from Pakistan. There is a history between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. After the Mecca takeover, Saudi Arabia a dialed for Pakistani soldiers to evict the radicals who had taken over the Grand Mosque. More recently in Bahrain, Pakistan



was again there. Most important, Pakistan is facing serious economic problems. The Prime Minister, Imran Khan, would do anything for \$10 billion! Also note the recent trip of MBS to Pakistan. Finally, remember that Saudi Arabia has Chinese missiles, which they initially bought without U.S. knowledge, missiles whose main purpose is to carry nuclear warheads. So which is the easiest and fastest route to become a nuclear power?

■ Do you think Trump administration will allow Saudi Arabia to enrich uranium and reprocess plutonium by itself?

A: I think those around Trump would love to do it because of the money that they would reap. But I believe the U.S. Congress will block it. Moreover, I think that Netanyahu will come to his senses and re-examine his love affair with MBS. If MBS has nuclear warheads, Israel will be threatened as never before. So I think that Israel would also realize the shortsightedness of Netanyahu's romance with MBS and make sure that Trump and the U.S. congress does not allow this transfer of technology to an irrational young man. But again note, Pakistan is a different story!

■ The report alleges those involved in the planning were aiming to enrich themselves and possibly in violation of the Atomic Energy Act, a federal law that lays out the preconditions of any nuclear deals with another nation and requires prior Congressional approval. What will be the result of the confrontation of the congress and President Trump administration in this case?

A: Congress will win this fight. There is no doubt in my mind. I think that even the Republicans would go against Trump. The brutal murder of Khashoggi is still on everybody's mind. MBS has lost a great deal of support in the U.S. Congress. He is seen as a pariah.

■ In May 2018, Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the Iran nuclear agreement. Trump logic for the withdrawal was Nuclear Non-Proliferation. But the transferring "sensitive U.S. nuclear technology" could in turn "allow Saudi Arabia to produce nuclear weapons that contribute to the proliferation of nuclear arms throughout an already unstable Middle East." How can explain this contradiction?

A: President Trump, Kushner and the older Trump sons are not known for their consistency. They seem to do anything for money and political advantage. So please don't look for consistency. It is not there. But the reality is that Iran is very unpopular in the U.S. and with U.S. lawmakers. So any action that is against Iran is generally welcomed. But I am almost sure that the U.S. will not allow this transfer. Trump will not win on this.

Shia: Doctrines and Practises

By Yusuf Abdullah

ABUJA — In the name of Allah who states "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses To fair dealing, and let not The hatred of others To you make you swerve To wrong and depart from Justice. Be just: that is Next to piety: and fear Allah, for Allah is well - acquainted with all ye do" Q5:8

May the everlasting peace and blessings of Allah be upon His noble servant, our master Muhammad and his pure progeny?

This piece was a short response to the need of our esteemed readers. No doubt, the need for Shia to enlighten the world on its origin and relevance to debunk the widely circulated propaganda against the creed is very crucial. There are so much lies, so much tales and so much calumniation propagated against it! Blind critics were sponsored to write baseless versions that are freely distributed across the world. With the level of our society's laziness in research at one hand and the calumnious efforts of the enemies and their paid agents on the other, all hands must be concertedly on deck to deliver facts as a trust from Allah without mischief. In view of this, I urge all adherents to do their best in this direction, and appeal to those who sincerely wish to know the truth to reflect on the general command of Allah, "... Ask those who know" Q21:7. On such enquiry however, one should never rely on the biased persons who always mislead. Allah states "O you who believe! Stand out firmly For Allah, as witnesses To fair dealing, and let not The hatred of others To you make you swerve To wrong and depart from Justice. Be just: that is Next to piety: and fear Allah, for Allah is well - acquainted with all ye do" Q5:8

To do justice as Allah enjoined in the verse above. Why shouldn't the opponents defeat the Shiites by reasons? Discuss with them on the religion in its entirety? If proof is the weapon of a believer, why are those opposed to the creed afraid of reading their books or discussing with them on any topic of interest? Why does the creed super geometrically spread all over the world? Is it due to ignorance or brain wash? It is good that one establishes the fact before his or her children accept the faith ahead. The earlier one carries an unbiased study the better. Enough was enough on the propagated lies in the 21st century. The accusing fingers are mostly on Iran and Iraq as one could hardly lay hand on any book discussing a topic from a judicious point of view. But with the atmospheric change, only Allah knows what will happen in the next few decades. With religious freedom, development in information technology, intellectual discussions and discourses, there is no limit for the doctrine owing to the prophetic teachings on the principle of justice and unity. One with Allah is majority! No doubt, the terrorist measures of the enemies will never succeed and the victims weather in Yemen, Bahrain or Nigeria among others will finally emerge victors.

■ Literal and Technical Perspectives

According to al-Munjid, the famous Arabic dictionary, 35th edition, published by Dar al - ulum in Beirut, Lebanon, 1987, page 411, the word Shia etymologically is used for a person, two people or a group, male or female. However, it is technically applied on the people that believe in the divine leadership of Ali and his family. Company, to accompany or followers. In page 2,144 of volume 2 of the Lisanul Arab, a more advanced Arabic dictionary, the word Shia originally refers to a group of people which equally applies to one or two, male or female with the same pronunciation and meaning. Technically, the word is applied on those that recognise the specific divine leadership of Ali and his family (may Allah be pleased with them). Whenever one is said to be Shia, he or she is regarded as their adherent. Zuhry, a renowned scholar said, the Shia are known for their love to prophetic progeny and recognition of their leadership. Abu Ishaq said when the word is related to somebody, it refers to the person's followers. The word Shia was used in the same context in the noble Qur'an, chapter 28 verse 15 in reference to one of the followers of prophet Musa (AS), just as it was used in chapter 37 verse 8 referring to prophet



Ibrahim as a follower of prophet Noah (AS).

■ Shia in Prophetic Traditions

In a prophetic tradition narrated by Ibn Athir who died in 606 AH, the prophet (S) addressed Ali as "O Ali! You and your Shia will reach Allah being pleased with him and well pleasing Him, and your enemies will reach Him, being angry and will be seized by their necks. Then the prophet demonstrated how this would be by putting his hand on his neck"

In another tradition by the same narrator, the prophet said "Surely there is a spring in paradise sweeter than nectar, smoother than butter, cooler than ice and more fragrant than musk. In that spring is the clay (tinah) from which we (my household and I) were created and our Shia are made from the same clay" Volume 1 page 129, no. 180. In some traditions, the prophet (S) used the term " Shia of your descendants" -believing in the divinely appointed institution. In the narration of Ibn Abbas by Ibn Hajar who died in 974, the prophet said to Imam Ali after the revelation of "Surely those who believe and do good deeds are the best of creation" Q98:7. Those are you and your Shia. On the day of resurrection, you will be pleased and well pleasing (to Allah) and your enemies will come angry and will be seized by their necks. Then the prophet demonstrated how this would be by putting his hand on his neck. (Ibn Hajar, section 11, chapter 1, verse 11. In a prominent narration by Ibn Asakir who died in 571 AH, from Jabir Bn Abdullah who said: "Once we were with the prophet Muhammad, when Ali arrived, upon which the prophet said, I swear by Him who has my life in His hand that surely this man and his Shia will be happy on the day of resurrection" then the verse "Surely those who believe and do good deeds are the best of creation" Q98:7 was revealed. From then, whenever the companions saw Ali coming, they would say, the best of creation has come. -Ibn Asakir, Volume, 2, page 442 and al-Suyuty, Volume, 6, page 589

In al-Milal wa al-Nihal, a famous source on different sects in Islam by Shahrestani who died in 548 AH mentioned "the Shia are those who followed Ali in particular and believed in his Imamate and caliphate according to the explicit teachings and will of the prophet Muhammad" On the other hand, Al-Hasan Ibn Musa al-Nawbakhti, a renowned Shia scholar who died in 313 AH, mentioned in his book, Firaq al-Shi'a, "the Shi'a are the party of Ali son of Abi Talib. They were called Shia of Ali during and after the life of the prophet and were known as the followers of Ali and believers in his Imamate" Page 17.

Sheikh al-Mufeed, a remarkable Shi'a scholar who died in 413 AH defined Shia as the followers of Ali and believers in his immediate successorship to the noble prophet, with further elaboration on Imamiyyah they are also known. This is a title for those who believe in the necessity of Imamate and continuity in all ages and that every Imam must be explicitly designated and must also be infallible and perfect. In the light of the above definition, the Shia believe that successorship to the noble prophet was absolutely divine appointment. As the prophet was appointed, so also the Imam on prophet's promulgation, starting with Imam Ali to Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdy (AS). Some of the well-known Shia -followers of Imam Ali- among the companions were Abdullah bn Abbas, Naufal bn Harith, Salman al-Farisy, Miqdad bn al-Aswad, AbuDharr, Ammar bn Yassir, Huzaifa bn al-Yamani, Khuzaimah bn Thabit, Abu Ayyub al-Ansary, Saad bn Ubadah, Ubayyu bn Kaab, Bilal al-Habashi, Hujr bn Addy, Jabir bn Abdullah al-Ansary, Muhammad bn Abi Bakr and Sahl bn Hunaif among others.

Unlike Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jama'a which sprang in the year of Jama'ah during the Umayyad Mu'awiya-led regime, the Shia, otherwise original Islam was first heard from the Great Messenger (S). Although more attention is focused on the political aspect in most discussions on the Shia /Sunna, theological and jurisprudential aspects are very important. Interestingly, books are generally available in soft and hard copies. The living religious authorities that issue religious verdicts and their jurisprudential books and sites are also there. We also have scholars that could be referred to in search of truth and guidance.

Beside the five fundamentals (Usool el-deen); tauheed-monotheism, adl-justice of Allah, nubuwwat- prophet-hood, imamate -institution of the Imams and ma'ad- the day of judgment, we have the ten branches that comprises of prayer, fasting, poor rate, pilgrimage to Mecca, Khums, enjoining what is rights and prevention of bad, allegiance to the Ahlul-bait and dissociation from their enemies and jihad which is multifaceted on general context. Conclusively, shiism is simply a belief on fundamentals and branches as elaborated above. It has nothing to do with belonging to one registered NGO or the other. Whoever believes in the creeds and practices is a Shia.

While urging our esteemed readers on the need to refer to Shi'a scholars, books and sites for more information and guidance, the need for the unconditional release of Sheikh el-Zakzaky and all his disciples cannot be overemphasized.

Assad, Putin's green light for battle of Idlib



1 → It is time to see that the Syrian government, with the support of its allies, has decided to take important and decisive steps to strengthen the Syrian Armed Forces and equipment in the northern suburbs of Hama and south of Idlib, despite the U.S. and international obstinacy.

The question is whether Syria and its allies have taken the final decision to confront the terrorists in Idlib, especially the legitimate and sovereign right of Syria, and Turkey has, like always, refused to fulfill its obligations? Can Lavrov speech at Munich Security Conference be considered a message to Turkey and the U.S.? What is the Syrian army's strategy to prevent civilian casualties? Can the battle of Idlib end easily and quickly? What will be the reaction of regional and international countries, and what will Turkey do?

■ What America misses with the domination of Damascus

The United States is worried that the Syrian army will remove all the military and field milestones that the United States and regional allies can use to exert pressure on Damascus. Especially since the battle of Idlib will be the last stage in the process of liberating the entire geography of Syria from terrorists.

With the liberation of Idlib, the Syrian government returns to the pre-crisis situation, and those who launched the multi-year war against Syria will return empty handed and Damascus will be victorious, while the U.S. and allies will be the losers.

Russia is aware of the situation, and analysts say they will directly support the Syrian army in the face of a possible U.S. reaction. Washington is afraid that Damascus will move swiftly to try to recapture all areas under occupation in Syria, including areas controlled by U.S. military units.

■ What will happen to the terrorists in Umm al-Ma'arik Battle?

Terrorists who do not surrender will be dealt with. According to media reports, all eyes are on the main roads such as Hamah-Idlib, Aleppo- Latakia. All measures are being taken for a tough battle in a region where thousands of Arab, Turkmen, Chinese and Uzbek terrorists are present.

No one can predict how difficult the battle to recapture Idlib might be. Some observers predict a tough fight, while others claim the Syrian army is more than ready to prevail after victories in the south of Syria.

Idlib is the home for rebels and terrorists gathered from all regions. The battle of the city is associated with a lot of complexities compared to the previous fronts and is difficult to predict the course of its field developments. The coming days will reveal the fate of Syria and the determination of the Damascus government to dominate the entire country.

'Transferring nuclear tech to Saudi is most destabilizing development'



1 → Notwithstanding close Israeli-Saudi ties, Israel will not welcome the development of nuclear weapons capability in Saudi Arabia. Such a development will challenge the burgeoning relations between these two regional hegemons.

■ Comparing the U.S. reaction to the Saudi missile and nuclear programs with its reaction to Iran's ones, isn't the U.S. policy enjoying double standard?

A: Of course, it is. But this is not the point. Washington's regional foreign policy has always been characterized by double standards. There are many reasons countries pursue certain foreign policy goals. Fairness, even-handedness, and morality are not among them.

■ What is Trump after in the region by such destabilizing acts?

A: Transferring sensitive nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia without a proper review by Congress may indeed be a violation of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act let alone its destabilizing regional impact. But the Trump administration's obsession with undermining Iran's interests and national security has led to adopt irrational foreign policy decisions that will have unsavory consequences in the long run.

■ How do you see Trump's son in law role in selling sensitive nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia.

A: The report by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform does indeed allude to the role of Jared Kushner in this episode. It also indicates that strong private commercial interests have been pushing for the sale of sensitive U.S. nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia for their own private gains. IronBridge Group Inc., a subsidiary of IP3, has been one of these private entities, which through its "advisor" General Michael Flynn has been a key proponent of the nuclear technology sale to Saudi Arabia. In other words, several influential private individuals and groups with strong ties to the Trump administration have been working on this scheme for some time now.

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The Tehran Times new pocket-sized glossary is now available on the market. The reader-friendly is a rich source of the most common journalistic terminology collected by the daily's retired staff.

It can benefit a wide range of tastes from students to professional journalists. Persian equivalents have been given for all entries, including idioms and expressions. The glossary also includes example sentences for entries the authors thought it would be a bit difficult to learn.

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Men’s health ‘more at risk’ than women: official

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — Men’s health, in all age groups is more at risk compared to women, said an official with Health Ministry in a press conference.

The conference was held to mark Iran’s national health week of men, running from February 20 to 26, ISNA reported on Saturday.

The theme of this year’s men’s health week is “more active and healthier men.”

“Currently, we are devising a strategic plan to address men’s health and we will implement it over the next [Iranian] year [starting March 21],” said Hamed Barakati who presides over the ministry’s department of population, family and school’s health.

“There are six priorities in this plan, addressing three conditions that lead to death and three other major conditions that lead to disease in men,” said Barakati.

According to him, women, in general, have a healthier lifestyle than men. This could be rooted in men’s attitude toward their health as they usually think they don’t need medical care or are immune to disease.

Reasons of disease and death in men

Overweightness, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, addiction, high blood lipids and blood pressure, as well as traffic accidents are among the factors threatening men’s life the most, Barakati noted.

“Even though men have averagely higher education than women, they have less health-related information,” said the official.



“Also, the number of women covered by health insurance is around two to three percent higher than men.”

In our country, he said, the factors leading

to death among men, aging 30 to 70 years, are cardiovascular diseases, traffic accidents, stroke, Diabetes, digestive system cancers, lung cancer, violence, high blood pressure,

Overweightness, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, addiction, high blood lipids and blood pressure, as well as traffic accidents are among the factors threatening men’s life the most.

suicide and respiratory diseases.

The factors leading to disease in men are mostly psychological disorders, skeletal system disorders and sexually transmitted diseases (STD), added Barakati.

“Around 57% of men suffer from STDs but they are usually late in visiting a specialist for it,” he further remarked.

Doctor visits low among men

According to Barakati, it is expect that 32% of men visit health centers ever year, but the statistics show much lower rates.”

“We also aim to pilot a plan, so that some health centers will be open in afternoons too, when men are more likely to visit such centers. Furthermore, in some cities, we have done medical screening for men in their workplace,” he further noted.

According to World Health Organization, In most parts of the world, health outcomes among boys and men continue to be substantially worse than among girls and women, yet this gender-based disparity in health has received little national, regional or global acknowledgement or attention from health policy-makers or health-care providers.

The Global Burden of Disease study led by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in 2010 (GBD 2010 study) showed that throughout the period from 1970 to 2010, women had a longer life expectancy than men. Over that 40-year period, female life expectancy at birth increased from 61.2 to 73.3 years, whereas male life expectancy rose from 56.4 to 67.5 years.

Iranian-made medication for Rheumatoid Arthritis unveiled

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — A new drug for Rheumatoid Arthritis, called Rhofanib 5, completely designed and manufactured in Iran, was unveiled, IRIB reported on Wednesday.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term, progressive, and disabling autoimmune disease. It causes inflammation, swelling, and pain in and around the joints and other body organs.

According to the head of Iran’s Rheumatology Research Center, the new drug was manufactured by NanoAlvand Pharmaceuticals.



Ahmadreza Jamshidi explained that Rhofanib 5 is a version of Tofacitinib, but the foreign version was very expensive, costing nearly 55 million rials (around \$1,200) and wasn’t covered by any insurance company because of its long treatment period, so practically, doctors couldn’t prescribe it.

For this reason, he added, the idea of producing a local version was first put forward.

According to American College of Rheumatology, Tofacitinib (Xeljanz) is an oral, small molecule drug used to treat adults with moderately to severely active Rheumatoid Arthritis in which methotrexate did not work well.

“The target group of this drug is pretty small, as the patients who have not responded to therapy at stage 3 rheumatoid arthritis, need to use it,” said Jamshidi.

He added that the drug may have more side effects compared to stage 1 and 2 medications, but it is surely more effective.

In this regard, the managing director of NanoAlvand Pharmaceuticals said the company decided to go on with producing Rhofanib 5, as manufacturing its foreign equivalent, Tofacitinib, required some special prerequisites. Additionally, using Tofacitinib usually poses great risks.

According to Nima Sepehri, Rhofanib 5 is the same quality of the foreign equivalents; However, it is not yet covered by insurance as it is still very new, but it definitely need to be insured soon as using it is quite indispensable to Rheumatoid Arthritis patients.

Self-care application to start in 6 months

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — A self-care digital application has been designed and will go on stream in the first half of the next Iranian calendar year (starting March 21), said Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi.

According to Raisi, people can install this application on their mobile phones and fill in their health parameters, ISNA reported on Wednesday.

The self-care application can be connected to each person’s health profile as well. By using it, people can

know their health status; plus, their doctors can access this information as well and use it in the course of treatment, he said.

In January, the deputy health minister for planning announced that all Iranians can see their health profiles on their mobile phones by the end of the current year.

According to Ali Akbar Haqdoust, creating digital health profiles and other similar services are all part of a unified plan toward setting up a comprehensive electronic health record (EHR) for every patient.



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Iran sees growth in carpets export to Iraq

HERITAGE d e s k **TEHRAN** – Iran’s Commercial Attaché in Iraq, Naser Behzad, has said that the demand of the Iraqi market for Persian carpets will considerably rise by 2020. “By 2020, Iraq is forecast to buy Iranian carpet at an estimated worth of \$600 million,” IRNA quoted Behzad as saying on Friday.



“Iran [currently] has a share of less than five percent in meeting the Iraqi market demand,” the official added.

Quoted by Iran Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), Behzad stated that Iraq annually imports about \$250 million worth of carpets from Turkey, China and Egypt.

During the past fiscal year, over 5,397,000 tons of Iranian carpets, worth \$424.451 million, were exported to over 70 countries with the U.S. standing on top of the importers list, said the Iranian official.

Germany, the UK, Italy, France, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, Russia, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden and Norway as well as Hungary, Romania, Poland and Ireland are major importers of Iranian carpet.

Persian carpets are sought after internationally for their delicate designs and good quality. The country’s official figures show the carpets have a significant share in Iran’s non-oil exports.

Iran to lift import tariffs on tourism-related equipment

TOURISM d e s k **TEHRAN** – Iran tourism chief has said that the country will exempt tourism-related equipment from import tariffs in a bid to buttress the tourism industry.



The Iranian cabinet, on a Wednesday meeting headed by President Hassan Rouhani, approved that import tariffs to be exempted from tourism-related equipment and machinery in order to promote the travel industry, Ali-Asghar Mounesan said, IRNA reported.

The country hosted 6,074,580 foreign nationals during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018) while the figure stood at 3,893,277 in the same period last year, based on official statistics compiled by the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization.

Iran embraces hundreds of historical sites such as bazaars, museums, mosques, bridges, bathhouses, madrasas, mausoleums, churches, towers, and mansions, of which 22 being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list.



ROUND THE GLOBE

Citadel of the Ho Dynasty

The 14th-century Ho Dynasty citadel, built according to the feng shui principles, testifies to the flowering of neo-Confucianism in late 14th century Vietnam and its spread to other parts of East Asia.

The Citadel of Ho Dynasty built in 1397, composed of the Inner Citadel, La Thanh Outer Wall and the Nam Giao Altar covers 155.5 ha, surrounded by a buffer zone of 5078.5 ha.

It is located in accordance with geomantic principles in a landscape of great scenic beauty between the Ma and Buoi rivers in Vinh Loc district, Thanh Hoa province of Vietnam.



The Inner Citadel constructed of large limestone blocks represents a new development of architectural technology and adaptation of geomantic city planning in an East Asian and South-east Asian context.

It demonstrates the use of architectural elements in terms of space management and decoration designed for a centralized imperial city in order to show a concept of royal power, based on the adoption of the Confucian philosophy within a predominantly Buddhist culture.

Being the capital of Vietnam from 1398 to 1407 and also the political, economic and cultural center of North Central Vietnam from the 16th to the 18th century, it bears exceptional testimony to a critical period in Vietnamese and South-east Asian history when traditional kingship and Buddhist values were giving way to new trends in technology, commerce and centralized administration.

(Source: UNESCO)

Darak, where the desert meets the sea

By Morteza Rahmani

TEHRAN (MNA) – The coastal village of ‘Darak’ can be found in the southernmost tip of Iran, on Mokran’s shores, stretching along the Sea of Oman. It is one of the most stunningly pristine beaches in the country.

The village is a potential touristic site, which enjoys all three types of the cliff, sandy and coral beaches in the vicinity.

Darak or ‘Darag’ in the local language means settling along the sea. It is where the burning sands nestle in the arms of the free waters.

In the coastline, the waters of the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean collide. The perceived coastlines of the sands and palm trees create wonderful scenes.

■ Location

The village forms a part of Zarabad County in the borders of Konarak. It is 19km from Johlou, the capital city of Zarabad. From the east, Darak is linked to the coastal village of Jod, and from the west it borders Poshti Village. Mountains embrace the village from the north and the sea from the south.

Abandoning the usual tourist routes, one could take an unknown route to venture into Sistan and Baluchestan. Trotting along the mild path, we will reach its sandy shore that offers a unique spectacle.

This village is located between two important southern port cities: Chabahar and Bandar Abbas.

The sand hills, shores, corals, rocks, mountains and surrounding forests, and the unspoiled and domesticated nature can all be seen in the same place.

Thanks to the efforts of the indigenous people and officials, this village has kept its purity and beauty. Interestingly, it does not appear on Iranian maps and you have to look in English maps, or look for the term “Darak Coast” in English or Darak Beach to geolocate.

■ Tourist sites and entertainment

Darak has a pristine shoreline. It is known for its extraordinary beauty. However, fortunately or unfortunately, its tourist potential has never been exploited and no tourist



development has been realized. It is a site for those who are looking for the authenticity and charm of this unspoiled coastline.

The sand dunes and the extended coast are a good combination for cycling enthusiasts. Roads in this region are also suitable for motorized leisure activities, including off-road.

Along the Chabahar road in the village of Darak are temporary signs indicating access to one of the most beautiful coasts of Iran. This road is itself a tourist attraction by the landscapes that it presents to the eyes, but also by the sporty driving that it requires - it is thus preferable to take this road with a car adapted to all types of ground.

The most obvious recreation at the seaside is swimming. The place is also very good for all kinds of water activities, from surfing to diving. But again, no development has been done and it must become equipped.

■ Picnics, photography and hiking

The village, in itself, is worth seeing. Do not hesitate on the way to stop for a picnic under the shade of a palm tree. Hiking trails abound and compete with the coastal path. The hikes are made in forests and palm groves up to the sky, always with a view of the coast of sand and coral. The sunsets are also of

unique beauty.

■ Best season to travel

The province of Sistan and Baluchestan is one of the hottest provinces of Iran. It rarely rains there, let alone in the years of drought. Nevertheless, the Darak village enjoys a spring climate most of the year. It is due to the refreshing winds that come from the Indian Ocean.

The best time to visit Darak is spring, from early to mid-season. After that, the heat of summer may reduce the pleasure of this trip. Summer remains a season to avoid due to high temperatures.

The beginning of autumn is still warm in the province, but the monsoon winds allow Chabahar and the littoral zones to benefit from a little more freshness. It is quite possible to go there in the fall, although it is better to wait until the second half of the season. Winter is also a good season to visit the village of Darak.

■ Inhabitants of Darak

The inhabitants of Darak belong to the Balouch ethnicity and speak Baluchi. Men’s clothing consists of shalwar kameez. It consists of very baggy pants. The kameez is also loose, which traditionally is long with long sleeves. The Balochi shalwar kameez is similar

to the styles worn in Afghanistan.

The female Balochi suit consists of the head scarf, long dress and a shalwar. Balochi women wear loose dresses which are embroidered in colorful designs that are particularly renowned for the finesse of their embroidery.

The inhabitants of Darak mainly do fishing, but they also practice agriculture as a secondary activity. The kindness of these people is proverbial. It is common that visitors and travelers are invited to enjoy delicious local dishes, seasoned with traditional spices, where the ancestral culinary know-how of the women of the village is tasted. According to the latest censuses, Darak is populated by less than 500 people, making up over a hundred households.

■ Therapeutic virtues of Darak coastal dunes

One of the interesting aspects of the coast of Darak village is the existence of white sand hills that, according to locals, have healing properties for muscular and bone pains. In order to cure these pains, they lie on the sand early in the morning, when the sun shines high in the sky.

Darak is a rather green place, and one wonders how the palms grew on this hot desert coast. This is another oddity of the village: this place nestled near the sea and located in a hot and dry area has fresh water, just a few tens of meters from the sea. Fresh water exists less than two meters deep.

This water is the origin of the forest and the variety of tropical species existing there. The inhabitants use fresh water to cultivate and harvest watermelon, corn, palm trees, etc. Side by side with these fruits, you will also see different species of acacia nilotica and fig trees pagodas.

Acacia nilotica (the red gum) is a species native to East Africa and the Indian subcontinent of the family Fabaceae, which also grows in Tchabahar in southern Iran. This tree has therapeutic virtues.

The fig tree of the pagodas is a tree belonging to the genus Ficus religiosa of the Moraceae family. It is a sacred tree according to Hinduism and Buddhism.

Sassanid-era tombs discovered in northeast Iran



HERITAGE d e s k **TEHRAN** – Two tomb cambers, which are said to date from early Sassanid era, have recently been discovered in Khorasan Razavi province, northeast Iran.

Located near Sabzevar, the tombs are estimated to date back some 1800 to 2000 years ago when people of the region practiced Zoroastrianism, a



local official said, CHTN reported on Saturday.

Under the Sasanians who ruled from 224 CE to 651, a revival of Iranian nationalism took place.

Zoroastrianism became the state religion and the government became centralized with provincial officials directly responsible to the throne, and roads, city buildings.

Over 2m Iranian artisans engaged in handicrafts



HERITAGE d e s k **TEHRAN** – More than two million artisans are currently working in various fields of handicrafts across Iran, deputy director of the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization has said.

Until now, some 400,000 craftspeople have been registered with the CHHTO, Pouya Mahmoudian said, CHTN reported on Saturday.

Iran’s handicrafts exports reached \$190 million in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018), showing 11 percent growth year on year.

Traditional ceramics, pottery vessels, handwoven cloths as well as personal ornamentations with precious and semi-precious gemstones are among Iranian exports to Iraq, Afghanistan and Germany, the U.S., the UK and other countries.

Museums grapple with rise in pleas for return of foreign treasures

The pressure on museums to grapple with the provenance of their collections has been revealed by freedom of information requests submitted by the Guardian.

A series of high-profile restitution claims have been received by institutions including the British Museum and the Natural History Museum in recent months. They include a call from the government of Gibraltar for the return of Neanderthal remains, including the first adult skull to be discovered by scientists, and a request from Chile for the repatriation of the remains of a now extinct giant ground sloth.

The letters, almost all of which resulted in the requests being rejected, show that long-running restitution claims for high-profile exhibits such as the Parthenon marbles are the tip of the iceberg as debate rages over the right of museums to keep hold of contested collection items.

Last month the Egyptian government called on the National Museum of Scotland to produce certification documents for its Egyptian antiquities after a row broke out over plans to display a casing stone from the Great Pyramid of Giza.

In October last year, the British Museum faced calls to return Hoa Hakananai’a, a basalt statue taken from Easter Island in 1868 and given to the museum by Queen Victoria the following year. In April, the ministry of cultural heritage in Italy requested the return of a marble relief depicting the freedmen Publius Licinius Philonicus and Publius Licinius Demetrius.

A British Museum spokeswoman said discussions about the future of both items were continuing. “We believe the strength of the collection is its breadth and depth, which allows millions of visitors an understanding of the cultures of the world and how they interconnect – whether through trade, conflict, migration, conquest, or peaceful exchange,” she said. “Research into provenance and how objects entered the British Museum’s collection is an active area of work for all of our curatorial

departments.”

Among the most recent repatriation claims is a request from Gibraltar for two Neanderthal skulls which are on display at the Natural History Museum in London.

The skulls, known as Gibraltar 1 and 2, have played a crucial role in shaping understanding of Neanderthals. Gibraltar 1, an adult female skull, was found in Forbes’ Quarry in 1848 and is believed to be about 50,000 years old. It is described by the museum as a “highlight specimen” in its human evolution gallery. Gibraltar 2 comprises five skull fragments of a Neanderthal child and was discovered at Devil’s Tower in 1926.

In a letter dated 10 September last year, the Gibraltar National Museum wrote to the Natural History Museum director, Sir Michael Dixon, to “formally request the return of the Gibraltar Neanderthal remains” on behalf of the British overseas territory’s government.

“It has been our desire for some time, and we feel that the moment is now the right one, that these human remains should return,” the letter said. “You will agree, I am sure, that it is entirely appropriate for these human remains return [sic] to their place of origin where they will be treated with the care and respect which they deserve.”

Responding to the letter on 20 September, Dixon cited the British Museum Act 1963, which allows for the disposal of collection items only in limited circumstances. “I must therefore decline your request for donation to your museum,” he said.

Dixon wrote that the Neanderthal remains played “a central part in our innovative engagement with the public on human evolution” and were “also in active use for collaborative international research on human origins and variation as part of a large comparative collection”.

In August, the museum received a separate request from Chile to return remains of Mylodon darwini, an extinct ground

sloth named after Darwin. That request was also rejected under the terms of the British Museum Act.

A Natural History Museum spokeswoman said: “We are continuing dialogue with both authorities and have confirmed our willingness to meet and discuss any other issues of interest and continue ongoing collaboration in research and public engagement with these countries.”

Prof Clive Finlayson, director of the Gibraltar National Museum, confirmed the organization was in contact with the Natural History Museum and that possibilities were being discussed.

In March 2017, the V&A received a request from the Welsh Conservative MP Guto Bebb for the return of two “firedogs” taken from Gwydir Castle in Conwy, north Wales. A museum spokeswoman said: “The V&A was gifted these firedogs by a benefactor in 1937. The V&A’s director wrote back to Guto Bebb MP and offered to make the firedogs available as a loan or as a reproduction. To date, this offer has not been taken up by a local museum or the present-day owners of Gwydir Castle.”

The art historian Alice Procter, whose Uncomfortable Art Tours seek to inform visitors about the colonial history of museums, said British institutions would increasingly be forced into “soul-searching” about the provenance of their items – and whether they should be returned.

“This is a really critical time for museums to work out where they stand on these questions,” she said. “Stop hiding behind historical acts. They have little justification for continuing to cite something like the British Museum Act.”

Procter referred to a recent report commissioned by the French president, Emmanuel Macron, which caused a stir in the museum world last November with a call for thousands of African artworks held by French museums to be returned to their countries of origin.

(Source: The Guardian)

Researchers explore an often ignored source of greenhouse gas

During photosynthesis, plants remove CO2 from the atmosphere. At the same time, the decomposition of dead plant tissue by soil organisms, including bacteria, fungi, earthworms, ants and others, produce CO2 and release it back into the atmosphere.

In a new study from UBC's Okanagan campus, researchers have discovered a surprising new source of carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions — bicarbonates hidden in the lake water used to irrigate local orchards.

"We have been studying the carbon content of soil for some time," says Melanie Jones, professor of biology and study lead author. "This large natural carbon store is hugely important in combatting rising atmospheric CO2 levels and it's essential to understand all the carbon transactions that take place in soil."

During photosynthesis, plants remove CO2 from the atmosphere and convert it into plant tissue such as roots, leaves, fruit or bark. At the same time, Jones explains, the decomposition of dead plant tissue by soil organisms, including bacteria, fungi, earthworms, ants and others, produce CO2 and release it back into the atmosphere.

Converted into organic matter
Critically, some of the CO2 that was removed from the atmosphere by plants can also be converted into soil organic matter by soil organisms, where it can remain in the soil for hundreds of years," says Kirsten Hannam, an agroecologist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and a co-author on the study. "So major research efforts are underway to figure out how to increase soil



organic matter content."

Hannam says greater organic matter in soil has the benefit of sequestering greater atmospheric CO2 and helping to combat climate change while also improving the ability of the soil to grow crops — an outcome she describes as a clear win-win.

As part of this research effort, Jones, Hannam and fellow UBC Okanagan soil scientist Andrew Midwood have been analyzing the chemical forms of CO2 that leave the soil surface during irrigation.

Working in a drip-irrigated apple orchard, the study involved continuous measurement

of air coming from dynamic soil respiration chambers placed in the orchard. This allowed for high-frequency monitoring of the soil surface and air. The tests were repeated with different water supplies, using irrigation water or de-ionized water, and the results were remarkably different.

Applied to the soil
"It turns out that some of the CO2 released after irrigation comes from the natural salts — bicarbonates — dissolved in water from Okanagan Lake as it is applied to the soil," says Midwood. "It's a process we had not considered until we noticed some unusual results when we traced the source of the CO2."

Midwood is quick to point out that understanding the processes that drive the release of CO2 from the soil is essential in combatting rising atmospheric greenhouse gases.

"This is a natural process," says Hannam. "Our results have to be considered in a broader context. Irrigation is essential to fruit production in the Okanagan Valley. Along with causing the release of CO2, from bicarbonates in the water, irrigation is also promoting the removal of CO2 from the atmosphere by encouraging plant growth. It's a balance and to understand the balance, you need to know all the component parts."

Their research has practical applications for any agriculture-based community in any arid region, especially if the main source of irrigation is from an alkaline lake. As irrigation needs to expand across arid and semi-arid regions, CO2 emissions originating from irrigation water may climb.

(Source: phys.org)

The agroecologist says greater organic matter in soil has the benefit of sequestering greater atmospheric CO2 and helping to combat climate change while also improving the ability of the soil to grow crops — an outcome she describes as a clear win-win.

Pharmaceutical residues in fresh water pose a growing environmental risk: new study

Over the past 20 years, concentrations of pharmaceuticals have increased in freshwater sources all over the world, as research by environmental experts at Radboud University has revealed. Levels of the antibiotic ciprofloxacin have reached the point of potentially causing damaging ecological effects.

The research is the first to examine the risks of two particular medicines in global freshwater sources, and is being published in Environmental Research Letters on February 22nd. The "study calls for more widespread data gathering to measure the problem around the world."

"Getting an accurate picture of the environmental risks of pharmaceuticals around the world depends on the availability of data, which is limited," says Rik Oldenkamp, lead author of the article. "It's true that there are models, such as the ePiE model, which can give detailed predictions of pharmaceutical concentrations in the environment, but these are often only applicable to places where we already have a lot of information, such as rivers in Europe."

The new model
The new model developed by the researchers, which builds on an existing model with a lower resolution, makes it possible to come up with worldwide predictions for individual ecoregions.

For the two pharmaceuticals investigated in the study - carbamazepine, an anti-epileptic drug, and ciprofloxacin, an antibiotic - the environmental risks were found to be 10 to 20 times higher in 2015 than in 1995.

The increased human use of ciprofloxacin was found to have a particularly high impact globally. "The concentrations of this antibiotic can be harmful for bacteria in the water, and these bacteria in turn play an important role in various nutrient cycles," says Oldenkamp. "Antibiotics can also have a negative impact on the effectiveness of bacteria colonies used in wastewater treatment."



Antibiotic resistance has been on the agenda of the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations General Assembly for a few years now. "Generally, it's seen as a problem for the health sector, as resistant bacteria can be spread within hospitals or through livestock," says Oldenkamp.

Various pathogens
"But there's little awareness of the role of the environment in this problem, even though it becomes increasingly clear that the environment functions as a source of resistance for various pathogens."

"Our model predicts a relatively high environmental risk for ecoregions in densely populated and dry areas such as the Middle East, yet those are precisely the areas where there is little data on pharmaceutical use and concentrations in surface waters," says Oldenkamp.

The researchers predicted human pharmaceutical consumption in these areas using regression models based on consumption in other countries, along with socio-economic and demographic information, and linked this to information related to other factors such as water sources and the number of people with access to wastewater treatment.

"Our model shows a particular need for new data in these types of areas," says Oldenkamp. The "model is really a starting point for creating an insight into the environmental risks posed by pharmaceuticals all over the world."

(Source: eurekalert.org)

Quantum dots can spit out clone-like photons, scientists suggest

Scanning Transmission Electron Microscope image (STEM) of single perovskite quantum dots. New study shows that single perovskite quantum dots could be a fundamental building block for quantum-photon technologies for computing or communications.

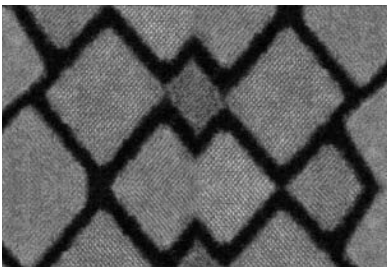
In the global quest to develop practical computing and communications devices based on the principles of quantum physics, one potentially useful component has proved elusive: a source of individual particles of light with perfectly constant, predictable, and steady characteristics. Now, researchers at MIT and in Switzerland say they have made major steps toward such a single photon source.

The study, which involves using a family of materials known as perovskites to make light-emitting particles called quantum dots, appears today in the journal Science. The paper is by MIT graduate student in chemistry Hendrik Utzat, professor of chemistry Mounji Bawendi, and nine others at MIT and at ETH in Zurich, Switzerland.

The ability to produce individual photons with precisely known and persistent properties, including a wavelength, or color, that does not fluctuate at all, could be useful for many kinds of proposed quantum devices. Because each photon would be indistinguishable from the others in terms of its quantum-mechanical properties, it could be possible, for example, to delay one of them and then get the pair to interact with each other, in a phenomenon called interference.

The quantum interference
"This quantum interference between different indistinguishable single photons is the basis of many optical quantum information technologies using single photons as information carriers," Utzat explains. "But it only works if the photons are coherent, meaning they preserve their quantum states for a sufficiently long time."

Many researchers have tried to produce sources that could emit such coherent single photons, but all have had limitations. Random fluctuations in the materials surrounding these emitters tend to change the proper-



ties of the photons in unpredictable ways, destroying their coherence.

Finding emitter materials that maintain coherence and are also bright and stable is "fundamentally challenging," Utzat says. That's because not only the surroundings but even the materials themselves "essentially provide a fluctuating bath that randomly interacts with the electronically excited quantum state and washes out the coherence," he says.

Coherent single photons
"Without having a source of coherent single photons, you can't use any of these quantum effects that are the foundation of optical quantum information manipulation," says Bawendi, who is the Lester Wolfe Professor of Chemistry.

Another important quantum effect that can be harnessed by having coherent photons, he says, is entanglement, in which two photons essentially behave as if they were one, sharing all their properties.

Previous chemically-made colloidal quantum dot materials had impractically short coherence times, but this team found that making the quantum dots from perovskites, a family of materials defined by their crystal structure, produced coherence levels that were more than a thousand times better than previous versions.

The coherence properties of these colloidal perovskite quantum dots are now approaching the levels of established emitters, such as atom-like defects in diamond or quantum dots grown by physicists using gas-phase beam epitaxy.

(Source: sciencedaily.com)

Researchers find recent drought may provide a glimpse of the future for birds in the Sierra Nevada

How wildlife respond to climate change is likely to be complex. To better understand the effects of climate change on the bird community in the Sierra Nevada region, new research published today from Point Blue Conservation Science examines the impacts to birds from a recent extreme drought (2013-2016).

The drought resulted in the widespread death of pine trees due to attacks by bark beetles, potentially impacting wildlife habitat. While the results were varied, researchers found that many bird species responded positively to the climate conditions associated with the drought, potentially offsetting the negative habitat impacts of the dead trees.

Under the assumption that climate conditions and species' responses to those conditions during the drought are similar to those that may occur in the future, researchers assessed the influence of temperature, water deficit, and tree mortality on bird abundance for 45 species. Researchers then used those models to project the effect of climate change on the bird community through



the year 2050.

Bird populations decline
"When we began our research, we were not originally thinking that it would result in a climate paper," said L. Jay Roberts, Avian Forest Ecologist at Point Blue and lead researcher on the study. "Our hypothesis was that bird populations would decline due to the large-scale tree deaths that resulted from the drought. We were really surprised to see positive bird numbers after the drought and went looking for an explanation. Then, the results started to make sense when

we added in the climate data and saw that birds responded more positively to the warmer temperatures than they were negatively impacted by the dead trees and dry conditions."

Overall, the total number of birds in the study area increased during the drought period and the models project similarly high numbers in response to warmer future climate conditions. Nearly half of the species in the study responded positively to temperature increase, while only 20% declined.

Roughly one-third of the species declined in response to higher water deficit, while one-third increased.

Increased temperature
However, many of the species that benefit from increased temperature were also sensitive to high water deficit and tree mortality. Thus, their positive response to increasing temperatures in the future could be offset by drought or habitat change.

While tree deaths from beetles resulted in a widespread loss of live tree cover in the study

area, the short-term effects on the avian community were rather modest.

Researchers found that about one-third of the species decline with high tree mortality, but the magnitude of those declines was small relative to the influence of the climate variables. And given more time, some species that utilize dead trees, such as woodpeckers and other cavity nesters, may increase.

Since an abundant and diverse assemblage of birds still inhabits the forest stands affected by mortality, forest managers should consider this potentially important biodiversity when developing management responses like salvage logging and reforestation.

"We are really lucky to have such a rich dataset to work with," said Roberts. "Working in partnership with the Forest Service to conduct this Bioregional Monitoring Project, we had nine years of rigorous observations, which allowed us to answer this important emerging conservation question."

(Source: natureworldnews.com)

Japan's Hayabusa2 spacecraft lands on Ryugu asteroid

A Japanese spacecraft completed on Friday a touchdown on the surface of an asteroid, where it fired a projectile at the rock's surface rock. A successful mission could help advance understanding of how our planet formed in the early Solar System.

Since last year, Hayabusa2, the Japanese probe, has been studying the asteroid called Ryugu. It surveyed the object's surface, and in the following months landed multiple robotic probes on its rocky terrain. All that work was done to support the aim of Thursday's operation (Friday in Japan) where it attempted to collect samples from Ryugu's surface and later bring them home to Earth. Other attempts could be made in the near future.

Hayabusa2 tried to collect material from the rugged surface of the asteroid with a device called a sampler horn.

To make small enough fragments, the spacecraft fired a projectile made of the metal tantalum — basically a bullet — at the asteroid's surface. Earlier this month, the mission's managers reported their simulation of this procedure on Earth to demonstrate that it would be able to succeed.

The spacecraft is carrying multiple projectiles so it can make more than one attempt at a touchdown. In March or April, Hayabusa2 is also expected to send an explosive package called a Small Carry-on Impactor to Ryugu's surface to make an artificial crater. Hayabusa2 might collect another sample of the material exposed in the crater. Asteroids are bits and pieces leftover from the disc of gas and dust that formed around the young sun and never quite coalesced into a planet. They contain some almost pristine compounds that help tell what the early Solar System was like 4.5 billion years ago.

Ryugu, as dark as coal, is a C-type, or carbonaceous, asteroid, meaning it is full of carbon molecules known as organics including possibly amino acids, the building blocks of proteins. Such molecules are not always associated with biology and can form from chemical reactions in deep space, but asteroids could have seeded Earth with the organic matter that led to life.

(Source: NYT)

14-year-old kid has reportedly become the youngest person to achieve nuclear fusion

We might have a new contender for the youngest person to ever achieve nuclear fusion.

Tennessee teenager Jackson Oswalt is not your average 14-year-old. While other kids are playing video games or watching TV, he's been busy putting together a nuclear laboratory in an old playground in his house.

The budding nuclear engineer has been working on this project since he was 12, and on 19 January 2018, just hours before his 13th birthday, he reportedly achieved his mission.

Using 50,000 volts of electricity, Oswalt was reportedly able to combine two atoms of deuterium gas, successfully fusing the nuclei in his reactor's plasma core.

After conducting some further tests over the following months, Oswalt became more convinced than ever that he had achieved fusion.

"For those that haven't seen my recent posts, it will come as a major surprise that I would even consider believing I had achieved fusion," he wrote on the fusor.net forum recently.

"However, over the past month I have made an enormous amount of progress resulting from fixing major leaks in my system. I now have results that I believe to be worthy."



To be clear, these claims have not been peer-reviewed as yet - until they're replicated and the results are published in a peer-review journal, we need to take all of this with a very, very big grain of salt.

The Open Source Fusor Research Consortium has also verified Oswalt's results. According to Jason Hull, an administrator on the website, Oswalt has now been added to the hobbyist group's list of successful fusioneers.

"Good work. Nice system. You have put some money into this," Hull wrote, applauding Oswalt's work.

He's not wrong. While Oswalt's nuclear reactor is considered a "tiny volume fusor", setting it up in an old playground in his parents' house cost something like \$10,000 (£7,700).

(Source: sciencealert.com)

Branson's Virgin Galactic takes another step toward space tourism

A Virgin Galactic rocket plane on Friday soared to the edge of space with a test passenger for the first time, nudging British billionaire Richard Branson's company closer to its goal of suborbital flights for space tourists.

Virgin Galactic's chief astronaut instructor Beth Moses, who will train future space tourists, joined pilots onboard SpaceShipTwo VSS Unity to evaluate the customer experience and cabin.

"This is what we're here to do, we're here to fly people in the back of our spaceship, that's what it's all about," said pilot David Mackay, who is now the first Scottish-born astronaut. "So for me it was an important step toward that operation."

The WhiteKnightTwo carrier airplane took off soon after 08:00 A.M. local time (11:00 A.M. ET) from the Mojave Air and Space Port in California. It released the SpaceShipTwo passenger craft at an altitude of about 44,000 feet and then the spaceship was catapulted to 55 miles above Earth.

The reusable SpaceShipTwo craft previously flew to an altitude of more than 51 miles in December 2018, marking the first U.S. commercial human flight beyond the atmosphere since the end of America's shuttle program in 2011.

Hundreds of spectators, including Virgin Galactic ticket holders and CEO George Whitesides, gathered on a clear morning in the desert to watch this latest test flight. The flight was postponed from Wednesday due to winds.

"We're in the 50th anniversary year of Apollo, and just like they had to do each step, we have to expand the envelope and do something more," Whitesides told the crowd.

Moses, now the first woman to fly onboard a commercial space vehicle, called it an "incredible ride," adding: "Richard, you're going to love it."

(Source: Reuters)

Natural mating raises hope for Persian leopard conservation

ENVIRONMENT **TEHRAN** — Two Persian leopards mated naturally for the first time at Tehran Zoological Garden on Wednesday and will breed by the next 100 days in case of reproductive success, Mehr news agency reported.

After diagnosing the female leopard and checking the male leopard sperm, their reproductive health has been ensured, so we decided to take hormonal interventions in order to increase



the probability of estrous detection and insemination, Iman Memarian, Tehran Zoological Garden director said.

Given that Kija, the female leopard, and Gaspar, the male one, are both healthy, there is a very high chance of achieving a live birth within less than 4 months, he highlighted.

Leopard litters typically contain two cubs, although litters can number up to six cubs, he said, adding, Kija may give birth to a litter of one or two cubs, while it is not farfetched that the number of cubs increases due to natural mating.

Gaspar sent to Iran since a year and a half ago, he stated, adding that this natural reproduction success has happened for the first time in the country.

Emphasizing on the importance of success in captive breeding or artificial insemination of Asiatic cheetahs, he noted that although cheetah’s reproduction is more complicated due to low quality of sperm, we hope that this pave the way for cheetahs breeding as well.

The Persian leopard is listed as Endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List; the population is estimated at fewer than 871–1,290 mature individuals and considered declining.

According to the Department of Environment, 156 leopards have been killed in Iran from 2005 to 2014, nearly 20 leopards a year. Studies indicate that currently there are less than 500 leopards nationwide.

Persian leopards are mainly threatened by poaching, depletion of their prey base due to poaching, human disturbances, habitat loss due to deforestation, fire, agricultural expansion, overgrazing, and infrastructure development.

In Iran, primary threats are habitat disturbances followed by illegal hunting and excess of livestock in the leopard habitats. The leopards’ chances for survival outside protected areas appear very slim.

LEARN ENGLISH

Allergies

Jim: Argh...I feel terrible, I keep **sneezing** and my eyes are all watery, what’s wrong with me?

Tom: Wow, you’re not dying are you, it looks like you have a cold, you should take some medicine.

Jim: I don’t think it’s a cold, I feel fine if I move a few feet away from my desk.

Tom: Maybe we should put you into **quarantine** ha-ha, jokes **aside**, I think you might have an allergy.

Jim: An allergy? I never thought about that, I don’t think I’m allergic to **pollen** though and I’m **desensitized** to bee stings after being stung so many times, Hmm...

Jim: Ow! Why did you **chuck** that peanut at me?

Tom: Just checking if you’re **allergic** to peanuts, I guess not.

Jim: Not funny! I could have gone into **Anaphylactic Shock**.

Tom: Okay my bad, how about dust? This office is full of it.

Jim: Yes, the whole is office is **dusty** yet I only feel affected near our desks!

Tom: Check these out!

Jim: You brought your cat into the office?!

Tom: Yes, it’s his birthday today, I didn’t want him to be alone on his special day!!

Jim: ACHOO! Argh put it away ACHOO!

Tom: I guess we found the problem, you’re allergic to cats!

■ **Key vocabulary**

sneeze: if you sneeze, air suddenly comes from your nose, making a noise, for example when you have a cold

quarantine: a strict isolation imposed to prevent the spread of disease

aside: used to show that something you have just said is not as important as what you are going to say next

pollen: the fertilizing element of flowering plants, consisting of fine, powdery, yellowish grains or spores

desensitize: to lessen the sensitiveness of

chuck: to throw something in a careless or relaxed way

allergic: have allergy towards something

anaphylactic shock: severe and sometimes fatal allergic reaction to a foreign substance such as bee venom

dust: dry fine powdery material, such as particles of dirt, earth

■ **Supplementary vocabulary**

sneeze: to expel air and nasal secretions from the nose involuntarily

hay fever: an allergic reaction to pollen, dust

contagious: capable of being transmitted by bodily contact with an infected person or object

(Source: irlanguage.com)



‘TOD only way for Tehran to survive air pollution’

ENVIRONMENT **TEHRAN** — While some **desks** experts believe that Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) in the metropolis of Tehran is being carried out based on no proper principles and will not be effective, secretary of the TOD committee of Tehran City Council has announced that TOD can be properly implemented in the capital and mitigate air pollution.

Tehrani citizens have described traffic and air pollution as the two main problems challenging them, ISNA quoted Afshin Khezrloo as saying on Friday citing results of a survey.

The fact is that the traffic congestion cannot be eradicated by optimizing traffic light control and coordination system, increasing passageways, building bridges and tunnels, implementing transportation projects, he noted, adding, so that there must be an efficient solution, through which vehicle use is reduced and public transport is promoted.

Lamenting that over 12 million liters of petrol is consumed daily in the Iranian capital, which costs 120 trillion rials (about \$2.9 billion) per year, he noted that some 40 trillion rials (about \$950 million) of which is partially paid by the residents, and over 80 trillion rials (nearly \$1.9 billion) paid by the government.

He went on to add that in fact it costs half of the municipality’s budget and ten times more than the Department of Environment (DOE) budget for protecting the environment and mitigating air pollution.

Meanwhile, Tehran is among the top 10 metropolises in the world, which inflicts the most time consuming traffic on its citizens, while 4,500 people annually lose their lives due to air pollution, he regretted.

He explained that apart from inappropriate culture and social behavior among the residents, poor land use change policies and not employing sustainable transport in-



frastructure, has exacerbated the capital’s condition.

To eradicate automobile-based cities, a determined law enforcement is required along with serious implementation of public transport development policies, he highlighted.

If transport planning and urban development is considered as two main factors in urban planning, then cities will not inefficiently develop, he said, adding that human-centered urban development is a solution for Tehran to survive from surrounding polluting vehicles.

Referring to TOD as an infrastructure reform making the public transportation system more efficient, he said that through TOD and only with infrastructure improve-

ments, the city can be free of numerous cars moving and emitting particles.

TOD encourages the citizens to use the high quality public transport system rather than private cars, he said, adding, to do so, there must be public transport stations all over the city with few distance.

Constructing residential and business units around high-speed transport stations, is another major method of TOD, which ensures that all residents and employees have access to a high quality public transportation system, the density of the residential units is at least 140 houses per hectare.

Accordingly, there must be appropriate pathways and bicycles lanes, which facilitates

Spinal cord injuries cause 2,000 disabilities annually in Iran

SOCIETY **TEHRAN** — Every year some 2,000 people with a disability involving their spinal cords are added to the population of disabled people in Iran, Mustafa Seraj, an official with Welfare Organization has said.

Providing these people with healthcare services costs some \$3.6 trillion rials (nearly \$85 million), Fars news agency quoted Seraj as saying on Saturday.

Last year some 25,000 people were affected by spinal cord injuries, he regretted, adding that, annually some 17,000 die in traffic-related accidents and many more sustain injuries which might result in lifelong disabilities.

People suffering from disabilities involving their spinal cords should spend some 50 million rials (nearly \$1,200) on a monthly basis over the first months of their disabilities to be stabilized, he added.

People with disabilities who live with their families should receive rehabilitation services at home which are covered by insurance companies, he highlighted.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) over a billion people, about 15% of the world’s population, have some form of disability. Between 110 million and 190 million adults have significant difficulties in functioning.

Rates of disability are increasing due to population ageing and increases in chronic health conditions, among other



causes.

People with disabilities have less access to health care services and therefore experience unmet health care needs.

■ Barriers to healthcare

People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to deficiencies in health care services. Depending on the group and setting, persons with disabilities may experience greater vulnerability to secondary conditions, co-morbid conditions, age-related conditions, engaging in health risk behaviors and higher rates of premature death.

Affordability of health services and transportation are two main reasons why people with disabilities do not receive

needed health care in low-income countries - 32-33% of non-disabled people are unable to afford health care compared to 51-53% of people with disabilities.

Limited availability of services, physical barriers such as uneven access to buildings (hospitals, health centers), inaccessible medical equipment, poor signage, narrow doorways, internal steps, inadequate bathroom facilities, and inaccessible parking areas, and inadequate skills and knowledge of health workers are some of the healthcare barriers for people with disabilities.

Governments can improve health outcomes for people with disabilities by improving access to quality, affordable health care services, which make the best use of available resources. As several factors interact to inhibit access to health care, reforms in all the interacting components of the health care system are required.

Devising coherent policy, health care financing to ensure that people with disabilities are covered and consider measures to make the premiums affordable, integrating disability education into undergraduate and continuing education for all health-care professionals, and conducting more research on the needs, barriers, and health outcomes for people with disabilities are some methods of addressing barriers to healthcare for people with disabilities.

‘Extinct’ Galapagos tortoise found after 100 years

A species of giant tortoise believed to have been extinct for more than 100 years has been discovered on the Galapagos island of Fernandina, according to Ecuador’s government.

The last known time a Fernandina Giant Tortoise was seen alive was 1906.

An adult female believed to be more than a century old was seen alive on Sunday during an expedition by the Giant Tortoise Restoration Initiative (GTRI), according to

a government statement.

Washington Tapia, GTRI director and expedition leader, said that genetic studies will be carried out to “reconfirm” that the tortoise found belongs to the Fernandina Island species.

Experts believe she is not alone. The tracks and scent of other tortoises, believed to be of the same species, were also observed by the team.

Conservationists have taken the tortoise to a breeding center on the nearby island of Santa Cruz.

The Fernandina Giant Tortoise is one of 14 giant tortoise species native to the Galapagos Islands, most of which are endangered. The tortoises have been killed over the past two centuries, both for food and for their oil, according to the Galapagos Conservancy, which jointly forms GTRI with the Galapagos

National Park.

The Galapagos archipelago includes 19 islands in the Pacific Ocean roughly 621 miles (1,000km) from the Ecuadorian coast. Fernandina, the third largest and youngest of the islands, remains the most volcanically active.

The Galapagos were declared a national park in 1959 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978.

(Source: CNN)

ENGLISH IN USE

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A ← → چ

Headquarters set up for renovating run-down areas

Headquarters for sustainable renovation of run-down areas in the capital city of Tehran has been established, Tehran Mayor Pirouz Hanachi said on Thursday.

“After two years of putting off the matter the headquarters for sustainable renovation of the run-down areas in Tehran was formed... we are planning on taking effective steps by mobilizing integrated management and public participation to renovate the run-down areas,” Hanachi wrote in Persian on his twitter account.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“hepato-, hepat-”

■ **Meaning:** liver

■ **For example:** A *hepatotoxic* agent is one which is known to cause liver damage, such as alcohol.

PHRASAL VERB

Wear off

■ **Meaning:** if pain or the effect of something wears off, it gradually stops

■ **For example:** The effects of the anaesthetic were starting to wear off.

IDIOM

Eat like a horse

■ **Explanation:** to eat large quantities of food

■ **For example:** Kim is staying for dinner, and she eats like a horse, so you better make some extra food.

برگزاری جلسه ستاد باز آفرینی پایدار شهر تهران

پیروز حناچی شهردار تهران روز پنج شنبه از برگزاری جلسه ستاد بازآفرینی پایدار شهر تهران پس از دو سال وقفه خبر داد.

به گزارش گروه اجتماعی باشگاه خبرنگاران جوان، پیروز حناچی شهردار تهران در صفحه توئیتر خود نوشت: پس از دو سال تاخیر، دومین جلسه ستاد بازآفرینی پایدار شهر تهران با حضور دستگاه‌های عضو تشکیل شد. نیت و همتان بر آن است که در سایه مدیریتی یکپارچه، گام‌هایی موثر و هماهنگ، با محوریت مشارکت شهروندان، برای نوسازی بافت‌های فرسوده و ناکارآمد شهر تهران برداریم.

U.S. plot aims to prevent displaced Syrians from returning home, warns Hezbollah official

A high-ranking member of the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement has warned about a U.S. plot to prevent the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland so that the displaced people could be used as a pressure “lever” against Damascus.

“Tens of thousands have already returned to Syria, and are now living normal lives. Why do some people in Lebanon are standing against the return of displaced people?” Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Sheikh Naim Qassem said on Saturday.

He said there was a global scheme, spear-headed by Washington, which sought to prevent the return of Syrian refugees under the pretext that the situation in the country was still unstable.

“After they failed to advance their projects through support for militant groups, they have now organized this conspiracy,” Sheikh Qassem pointed out.

The senior Hezbollah official underlined that the U.S. was harming Lebanon through the issue of displaced Syrians as it wanted the Beirut government to remain at the minimum level of efficacy.

Sheikh Qassem, however, said “some political parties in Lebanon will frustrate this scheme, and will sustain the country’s sovereignty.”

“I want to ask those who do not want the return of Syrian: What is your justification?



If you are referring to the Lebanese Constitution, the Constitution makes mention of privileged relations with Syria. If you are talking about Lebanon’s interests, then it is in the country’s best interests that the refugees return to their country. We have a very difficult economic and social situation...” the Hezbollah deputy secretary general added.

On January 20, Lebanese President Michel Aoun urged world powers to “make all efforts” to help the repatriation of Syrian refugees as Damascus forces continue to

liberate the country from the clutches of foreign-sponsored Takfiri terrorist groups.

“Lebanon calls on the international community to make all efforts possible and provide suitable conditions for a safe return of displaced Syrians,” Aoun told an Arab economic summit in Beirut.

Lebanon’s official National News Agency reported on December 24 last year that more than 1,000 Syrian refugees had returned to their homeland from various areas in Lebanon.

The return of refugees took place in the southern Lebanese cities and districts of Tripoli, Aarsal, Tyre and Nabatieh, and under the supervision of Lebanon’s General Security in cooperation with the United Nations refugee agency.

The refugees returned home in buses sent by Syrian authorities through al-Zamrani, Jdeidat Yabous and al-Dabbousiya border crossings.

The refugees underwent medical checks and polio vaccines were administered to children. They were then transferred to Syria’s northern and central provinces of Idlib and Homs in addition to other areas in the crisis-stricken Arab country.

More than 1,000 Syrian refugees also returned to their homeland from different areas in Lebanon, including Nabatieh, Bekaa, Tripoli and Shabaa on December 16, 2018.

The Arabic-language Elnashra online independent newspaper reported that the return of refugees took place under the supervision of Lebanon’s General Security Directorate in cooperation with the Lebanese army.

More than one million Syrian refugees are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon. The Beirut government estimates that the true number of Syrians in Lebanon stands at 1.5 million.

(Source: Press TV)

Trump picks ambassador to Canada for UN post

Donald Trump announced that he has selected Kelly Craft, the U.S. ambassador to Canada, as his nominee to serve as the next U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Trump said in a pair of tweets that Craft “has done an outstanding job representing our Nation” and he has “no doubt that, under her leadership, our Country will be represented at the highest level.”

Two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters had told The Associated Press that Trump had been advised that Craft’s confirmation would be the smoothest of the three candidates he had been considering to fill the job last held by Nikki Haley.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., had backed Craft for the post, and she also has the support of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser John Bolton, the people said. Trump’s first pick to replace Haley, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert, withdrew over the weekend.

McConnell praised Craft as “an exceptional choice for this critical post.” He added, “She has a long record of service to her state and the nation and I’m confident she will continue to serve with distinction as America’s voice to the world at the United Nations.”

Craft, a Kentucky native, was a member of the U.S. delegation to the UN General Assembly under President George W. Bush’s administration. She is also friends with McConnell’s wife, Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, and thanked Chao for her “longtime friendship and support” at her swearing-in as ambassador.

As U.S. ambassador to Canada, she played a role in facilitating the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement, a revamp of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Trump had also considered U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell and former U.S. Senate candidate John James of Michigan for the post.

Nauert’s withdrawal from consideration came amid a push within the administration to fill the position, given a

pressing array of foreign policy concerns in which the United Nations, particularly the UN Security Council, is likely to play a significant role. From Afghanistan to Venezuela, the administration has pressing concerns that involve the world body, and officials said there had been impatience with the delays on Nauert’s formal nomination.

Trump said Dec. 7 that he would pick the former Fox News anchor and State Department spokeswoman for the UN job, but her nomination was never formalized. Notwithstanding other concerns that may have arisen during her confirmation, Nauert’s nomination had languished in part due to the 35-day government shutdown that began Dec. 22 and interrupted key parts of the vetting process. Nauert cited family considerations in withdrawing from the post.

With Nauert out of the running, officials said Pompeo had been keen on Craft to fill the position. Although Pompeo would like to see the job filled, the vacancy has created an opportunity for him and others to take on a more active role in UN diplomacy. On Thursday, for example, Pompeo was in New York to meet with UN chief Antonio Guterres.

Trump has demoted the UN position to sub-Cabinet rank, in a move backed by both Bolton and Pompeo, according to three other officials. Grenell had suggested he wasn’t interested in a non-Cabinet role. The officials were not authorized to discuss internal personnel deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Haley had been a member of the Cabinet and had clashed repeatedly with former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and others during the administration’s first 14 months. Bolton was not a Cabinet member when he served as UN ambassador in President George W. Bush’s administration, and neither he nor Pompeo is eager to see a potential challenge to their foreign policy leadership in White House situation room meetings, according to the officials.

France’s UN Ambassador Francois Delattre said she looks forward to working with Craft, if confirmed by the Senate, “after the particularly close and trusting partnership that I had developed with Ambassador Nikki Haley.”



“I hope that Ms. Craft will continue, like Nikki Haley, to be a bridge between Washington and the UN at a time when we more than ever need an America that is engaged with the UN in world affairs and committed to our shared values, beginning with human rights,” DeLattre said.

Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto, said Craft was appointed ambassador to Canada because of her financial contributions to the Trump campaign, but said that’s not unusual as past ambassadors have also contributed to presidents who have appointed them.

“I think Ottawa has regarded Craft as a lightweight, partly because of her background and partly because the sense is that Trump, unlike his predecessors, doesn’t listen to his ambassadors or care what they think,” Wiseman said.

Craft is married to billionaire coal-mining executive Joe Craft, and they are major Republican donors.

After being named ambassador to Canada, Craft made headlines for telling the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. that she believes in “both sides” of climate science.

Craft has been ambassador during a low point in relations. Last year Trump called Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau weak and dishonest, words that shocked Canadians.

(Source: AP)

3 UK ministers throw weight behind Brexit delay to stop no-deal

Three British cabinet ministers have publicly indicated they will back plans to delay Brexit if lawmakers vote down Prime Minister Theresa May’s plan for a new deal with the European Union, writing a column in a national newspaper Saturday.

Business Minister Greg Clark, Work and Pensions Minister Amber Rudd, and Justice Minister David Gauke signaled in a Daily Mail column that they will side with rebels and opposition parties next week to stop Britain leaving without a divorce deal on March 29 if necessary, adding their weight to calls for May to rule out a no-deal departure.

May is struggling against the clock to get a deal with Brussels on Britain’s exit from the world’s largest trading bloc that will pass parliamentary muster. She will meet European Council President Donald Tusk on

the sidelines of an EU-League of Arab States summit on Sunday, but EU diplomats are not expecting any imminent breakthrough.

In the column headlined “If we don’t get a deal next week we must delay Brexit,” Clark, Rudd and Gauke wrote that a no-deal exit was a risk to business, security and British territorial unity, and accused some parliament colleagues of complacency.

“Far from Brexit resulting in a newly independent United Kingdom stepping boldly into the wider world, crashing out on March 29 would see us poorer, less secure and potentially splitting up,” they said, referring to the threat of a new bid for Scottish independence.

“Our economy will be damaged severely both in the short and the long term. Costs will increase, businesses that rely on just-in-time



supply chains will be severely disrupted and investment will be discouraged,” they wrote.

The ministers called on members of the European Research Group, formed by Conservative pro-Brexit lawmakers, to back the government’s deal in parliament or risk

seeing Brexit delayed.

Both May’s Conservatives and the main opposition Labour Party are formally committed to delivering Brexit. In recent days Labour has appeared to soften its stance on a second referendum, although May has ruled such an option out.

Lawmakers from both parties, however, are deeply split over how or even whether Britain will leave, and no majority has so far emerged in parliament for any comprehensive Brexit strategy.

May has promised that if she does not bring a revised deal back by Feb. 27, parliament will have an opportunity to vote on the next steps. Some lawmakers are expected to use that to try to wrest control of the process from the government.

(Source: AP)

Germany ‘seeks extradition’ of Syria’s Jamil Hassan from Lebanon

Germany has asked Lebanon to extradite Syrian General Jamil Hassan, Der Spiegel reported, after the notorious chief of Syria’s Air Force Intelligence Directorate was reportedly admitted to a hospital in Lebanon.

The German federal prosecutor had issued an arrest warrant against the general in June for committing crimes against humanity based on a complaint filed by Syrian refugees in Germany.

Thousands of Syrians have allegedly been tortured in detention centers under the direct control of General Hassan, Syria’s longest-serving intelligence chief and considered to be among the most powerful officials in the country.

Al-Masdar, an Arabic-language news outlet, first reported on Thursday that General Hassan was in Lebanon to seek medical treatment. There has been no official confirmation on his whereabouts since.

General Hassan is a member of al-Assad’s inner circle. The United States Treasury Department froze his assets

because of his role in cracking down on protesters.

However, Germany has shied away from officially confirming the extradition request. Al Jazeera reached out to the country’s federal prosecutor’s office but had yet to receive a response at the time of publication.

Lebanon’s Interior Ministry denied receiving any notification from Interpol to arrest the general.

Michael Aoun, Lebanon’s president, said that if General Hassan was in Lebanon, his office did not know. “If he (General Hassan) sneaked in because of the difficulty of controlling the border, it must be investigated,” Aoun said.

Aoun’s political party, the Free Patriotic Movement (at-Tayy?r al-Wa?an? al-Horr/Aounist party), is an ally of Hezbollah in the Lebanese parliament. However, experts said information about the possible whereabouts of the Syrian general may well have been concealed from him.

Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Statute of the Inter-

national Criminal Court (ICC) and its citizens, therefore, cannot be prosecuted in The Hague. Furthermore, Russia and China have vetoed several attempts to set up an international tribunal to adjudicate on the crimes, purportedly to protect high-ranking officials in the Syrian administration such as General Hassan.

However, Germany’s universal jurisdiction laws allow it to prosecute people for war crimes committed anywhere in the world. Just last week, two Syrian intelligence officials were apprehended by German law enforcement. Anwar R was arrested for his involvement in torturing Syrians between 2011-12 and Eyad A for assisting in the killing of two and torturing of at least 2,000 people.

These two officials were in Germany while General Hassan is unlikely to ever set foot in Europe. Germany cannot prosecute in absentia, leading experts to believe that he would escape a trial.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

Bahraini FM draws ridicule by hailing bin Salman as Wall of China

Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifah has sparked international ridicule by drawing a parallel between the House of Saud regime Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and the Great Wall of China.

On his Twitter account, Khalifah posted a photo of bin Salman on the Great Wall of China, saying, “Like the Chinese who have a wall, we have bin Salman.”

He also described the heir to the Saudi throne as a tall wall that no aggressor could ever reach it.

The praise comes amid mounting criticism of bin Salam over the years-long Saudi regime war on Yemen and the killing of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

This week, the Saudi crown prince traveled to Pakistan, India and China in his first major, multi-destination tour outside the Middle East since Khashoggi’s murder last October.

He signed investment agreements worth \$20 billion during his trip to cash-strapped Pakistan and cemented a \$10 billion deal for a refining and petrochemical complex in China. The prince also vowed a \$100 billion Saudi investment in India.

Bin Salma’s Asian tour is widely believed to be aimed at rehabilitating his image months after the assassination of Khashoggi inside the Saudi regime consulate in Istanbul.

Bahrain, a staunch Saudi ally, has long been following in Riyadh’s footsteps in its foreign and domestic policies.

The Bahraini people has been holding regular pro-democracy protests since February 2011, demanding that the House of Khalifah relinquish power and establish a just system representing all Bahrainis.

Bahrainis have also complained against widespread discrimination against the Shia majority in the tiny Persian Gulf kingdom.

Manama has responded to the demonstrations with an iron fist. In March 14, 2011, troops from the Saudi regime and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were deployed to Bahrain to assist the regime in quashing the dissent.

Scores of protesters have lost their lives and hundreds of others sustained injuries or put behind bars as a result of the House of Khalifah regime’s crackdown.

The regime has also detained rights campaigners, broken up major opposition political parties and revoked the nationality of pro-democracy activists.

In recent months, the Bahraini regime has also stepped up its attempts to normalize relations with Israel.

On Friday, people took to the streets of the Baharini villages of Ma’ameer, Abu Saiba, Shakhurah to express their anger at any normalization of ties with Tel Aviv.

(Source: Press TV)

Venezuela closes Colombia border as aid dispute turns deadly

Venezuela’s military is braced for a showdown with opposition supporters at the country’s border crossings with Colombia and Brazil ahead of a United States-backed effort to bring aid in.

The National Guard fired tear gas at a crowd of people clearing a barricaded border bridge on Venezuela’s border with Colombia at dawn on Saturday, a day after soldiers opened fire on indigenous people near the border with Brazil, killing two and injuring at least 15 others.

The government of President Nicolas Maduro, who has dismissed the aid effort as a “cheap show” and pretext for a U.S. invasion, has partially closed Venezuela’s border with Colombia, and shut down crossings from Brazil and the Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao.

The United States, which is among dozens of nations to recognize opposition leader Juan Guaido as Venezuela’s legitimate president, has stockpiled some 600 tons of aid in the Colombian frontier town of Cucuta to ship across the border this weekend.

The Brazilian government said it has stockpiled 200 tons of food and medicine in the town of Boa Vista

With tensions running high after Guaido declared himself Venezuela’s interim president last month, Maduro has denied there is a humanitarian crisis in the country despite widespread shortages of food and medicine and hyperinflation.

At least four National Guard officers on Saturday at the border disavowed Maduro’s government and requested assistance from the Colombian government, Colombia’s migration agency said on Saturday.

In Kumarakapay in southern Venezuela on Friday, residents told Reuters news agency that soldiers entered their village and opened fire when residents tried to block a military convoy they believed was headed towards the Brazilian border to block aid deliveries

An indigenous couple were killed and at least 15 people were injured, residents said.

Seven of the injured were rushed by ambulance to a hospital in Brazil’s Boa Vista, a spokesperson for the state governor’s office said.

Diosdado Cabello, one of the most prominent figures in Maduro’s Socialist Party, accused the civilians involved in the clash of being “violent groups” directed by the opposition.

The Venezuelan opposition is planning to hold three simultaneous aid pushes on Saturday.

On Friday, Guaido, the opposition leader, made a surprise appearance in Cucuta during a concert organized by British billionaire Sir Richard Branson.

In remarks after the event, Guaido spoke alongside Colombian President Ivan Duque and Chilean President Sebastian Pinera and said he had been able to circumvent Maduro’s travel ban only with the help of the armed forces.

“The question of the moment is for the armed forces because we know society is absolutely mobilized to help others,” he said. “The question is, how to do this when airspace, maritime access, roads are closed.”

Duque meanwhile urged Venezuela’s military to be on “the right side of history”, calling the delivery of aid an “irreversible, historic process”.

Hours later, Caracas said it had sealed the Colombian border across the whole of Tachira - the western state that borders Cucuta - citing threats to Venezuela’s security.

“Due to the serious and illegal threats attempted by the Government of Colombia against peace and sovereignty in Venezuela, [the Venezuelan government] has taken the decision of a total, temporary closure of all bridges that unite both countries in Tachira,” Delcy Rodriguez, Venezuela’s vice president, wrote on Twitter.

(Source: agencies)

FIFA strips Peru of hosting Under-17 World Cup

Peru will no longer host the Under-17 World Cup in October after being stripped of the tournament by FIFA on Friday over concerns about the infrastructure.

The decision was taken by the bureau of the FIFA Council which features the six regional confederation presidents and FIFA President Gianni Infantino.

The tournament was due to be staged in October after Peru was awarded the competition last June.

But following various inspection visits, FIFA said it found a “number of organizational and infrastructure challenges linked to the event delivery.”

FIFA is evaluating alternative host countries, which were not specified. England is the defending champion after winning the 2017 edition in India.

(Source: AP)

Goggia gets off mark in Crans-Montana downhill



Olympic champion Sofia Goggia marked up a belated first World Cup win of season in Saturday’s downhill at Crans-Montana in Switzerland.

The Italian was sidelined for three months after fracturing her ankle in October, only making her comeback last month.

She took super-g silver at the world championships in Are and went one better in Saturday’s World Cup race.

The 26-year-old was joined on the podium by Switzerland’s Joana Haehlen with Austrian Nicole Schmidhofer in third.

This was Goggia’s sixth career World Cup win and fourth in the discipline. With two downhill of the women’s season remaining Schmidhofer leads the race for the discipline honors from her compatriot Ramona Siebenhofer.

(Source: AFP)

Diogo Dalot uses first paycheck to buy minibus for former club

Diogo Dalot used his first paycheck at Manchester United to buy a minibus for the club where he began his playing career.

The 19-year-old, who signed for United from Porto in the summer, played for four years at the Escola de Futebol O Fintas in his native Braga.

Dalot acquired a new nine-seater for his former football school and surprised them this month, it has emerged.

“Diogo had sent us a signed [Manchester United] jersey and we were talking to him on Skype when he told us to go outside of the building and we saw that there was a bus parked outside,” Luis Travessa Martins, founder and coordinator of the Escola de Futebol O Fintas, told ESPN FC on Thursday.

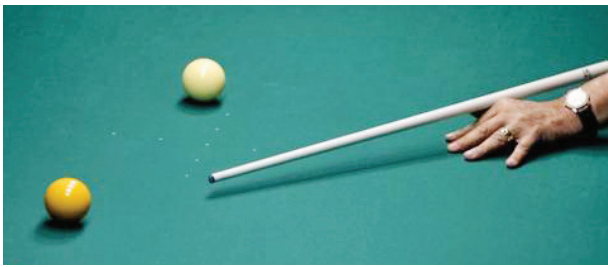
“It was new and adapted for the requirements we needed. It was a very gratifying surprise. He had kept it a secret. He told us that with his first pay-check [at United], he wanted to give it us this as a gift. We are a small club, so every help is welcomed.”

Despite leaving the Escola de Futebol O Fintas at the age of nine, Dalot has always remained in touch with the school.

“Whenever he comes to Braga, he comes to visit us, he watches the games and takes time to talk to the young players,” Martins said. “He is an inspiration to our players.”

(Source: Soccer.net)

Billiards group eyes 2028 after unsuccessful bid for 2024 inclusion



The group bidding for cue sports to be added to the Olympic program is targeting the 2028 Games in Los Angeles after missing out on Paris 2024. It was announced on Thursday that billiard sports - along with squash and chess - would not feature in France.

World Confederation of Billiards Sports general secretary Diane Wild said the Billiards 2024 group had staged a “truly great bidding campaign”.

She added the decision of the organizers was “a disappointment”.

“Our goal is now to move ahead and stay united for the recognition of our sport,” said Wild.

Billiards 2024 said in its statement it was looking forward to “another bidding campaign in the land where pool was born, where we could take part in the Olympic Games 2028 in Los Angeles”.

(Source: BBC)

Nike stocks skid after Zion Williamson’s shoe blowout

Sports apparel giant Nike’s shares took a \$1.1 billion hit on Thursday as the fallout from Duke forward Zion Williamson’s knee injury continues on social media.

Approximately 30 seconds into the No. 1 Blue Devils’ game against North Carolina on Wednesday night, Williamson’s left shoe fell apart on the court as he planted hard while dribbling near the free throw line, causing him to slip and fall. The blue rubber sole ripped loose from the white shoe from the heel to the toes along the outside edge, with Williamson’s foot coming all the way through the large gap.

Williamson — who is widely projected to be the No. 1 pick in the upcoming NBA draft — clutched his right knee after the fall but was able to walk off the court by himself. Duke announced Thursday that Williamson was diagnosed with a Grade 1 right knee sprain, and his status is day-to-day. By Thursday morning, Nike, which manufactured the shoes Williamson was wearing, also was feeling the impact of the injury. “We are obviously concerned and want to wish Zion a speedy recovery,” Nike said in a statement to the Herald on Thursday. “The quality and performance of our products are of utmost importance.



While this is an isolated occurrence, we are working to identify the issue.”

Investors, however, were clearly disappointed by the fiasco and Nike’s stock price opened down Thursday morning by 1 percent on the New York Stock Exchange. By closing, the Oregon-based company’s stocks were down

1.1 percent at \$83.95, erasing approximately \$1.1 billion from the company’s market capitalization since Wednesday’s close.

“Shoes have failed before, but not as visibly,” said Matt Powell, a senior industry adviser for sports for the NPD Group, a market research firm.

Charles Leclerc hopes to give Ferrari ‘problem’ in Sebastian Vettel duel



Charles Leclerc hopes he is competitive enough against Sebastian Vettel to give Ferrari a welcome “problem” in their pursuit of F1’s world titles this year.

Ferrari’s new boss, Mattia Binotto, suggested at the launch of the team’s new car “if there are particular situations our priority will be Sebastian”, the team’s established lead driver of the last four years.

“I think it’s normal, especially early in the season, he is the guide with which we aim for the championship,” said Binotto. After starring in his rookie season at Sauber to earn a promotion to the team he says he has always dreamed of driving for, Leclerc says he is “realistic” about where he currently is in his career.

But he still hopes to quickly be in a position to challenge his new team-mate.

“Obviously I will be happy if I get used to this car as soon as possible and that I’m straight on the pace,” said Leclerc, who enjoyed a productive opening week of testing at Barcelona in the promising new Ferrari.

“But I’m realistic too, it’s only my second season in Formula 1 and I have a lot to learn.

“There’s a long road ahead, but I’m pushing to be as ready as possible for the

first race and if Mattia has the problem to manage two quick drivers then it’s a good sign for me.”

---Who’s gone fastest and furthest at Testing?

Leclerc added: “But I want to focus on myself, trying to improve every time I’m going in the car. It’s a top team and they are quite different to the team I was in before so it’s a bit of an adaption.”

---Leclerc eager to learn from Vettel

While naturally keen to beat each other on track over race weekends, both Vettel and Leclerc have insisted it is Ferrari’s wider interests which come first as the team look to end what is now an 11-year title drought.

Vettel has already said he is not expecting any personal problems with his new young team-mate and Leclerc confirms they are already “working very well together”.

“Seb is a very nice guy and it’s not difficult to get on with him, so that’s good.

“We are working on different things with the car and it’s good to have Seb next to me during these days [at testing]. It’s good to see what are his strong points and what I can learn from him.”

(Source: Sky Sports)

PSG chairman says Neymar, Mbappe to stay, hints at future signings



Paris Saint-Germain chairman and CEO Nasser Al-Khelaifi has emphatically told ESPN FC that superstars Neymar and Kylian Mbappe will be staying with the club for the foreseeable future.

Speaking exclusively on Friday with ESPN FC after confirming a new three-year partnership with Accor’s Accor Live Limitless (ALL) that moves the club into Europe’s top four in terms of shirt sponsorship deals, Al-Khelaifi rejected the idea that the Ligue 1 giants were facing the prospect of selling at least one of their stars this summer because of UEFA’s financial fair play (FFP).

“Kylian and Neymar are PSG players,” said the Qatari. “They will stay PSG players and they would have -- with, or without, Accor.”

Al-Khelaifi then hinted that PSG’s days of spending lavishly could be back thanks to their latest revenue stream -- which is almost double what outgoing sponsor Emirates were paying -- and has a further option of three years. Although he insisted that FFP will always be respected as Les Parisiens remain under scrutiny and have an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport pending.

“For sure, [the new partnership deal] will increase our revenue to allow us to invest more -- this is a big deal for us,” he

“At this juncture, we are optimistic that while negative headlines might weigh upon Nike shares for a bit, any lasting damage to the company and its shares will prove minimal,” Oppenheimer retail analyst Brian Nagel said in a note. “Nike senior management has a history of acting masterfully at always protecting and enhancing the company’s brand image with core customers, even through moments of pronounced consternation.”

Fans, however, took to social media following the incident, dunking on Nike.

Former President Barack Obama — who watched the game courtside near the Duke bench — said on Twitter that Williamson “seems like an outstanding young man as well as an outstanding basketball player. Wishing him a speedy recovery.” Nike exclusively supplies Duke’s basketball team with uniforms, shoes and gear. Endorsement deals with star athletes, including Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James and Serena Williams, and sponsorship from top college basketball and football teams are part of Nike’s growth strategy. Last year, the company spent \$11.6 billion on marketing and endorsement contracts.

(Source: Boston Herald)

Patriots owner Robert Kraft charged in Florida prostitution sting

Robert Kraft, owner of the Super Bowl-winning New England Patriots, was charged in Florida with soliciting prostitution after he was captured on video engaging in sex acts with a worker at a massage parlor, police said on Friday.

Kraft, 77, a billionaire businessman who built the Patriots into the National Football League’s most dominant franchise, was swept up in a police sting targeting sex-trafficking in day spas and massage parlors in several Florida counties. The operation has led to hundreds being charged.

Kraft, who lives in Massachusetts but owns property in Palm Beach, Florida, is accused of visiting Orchids of Asia Day Spa in Jupiter, Florida, on two separate occasions to solicit sex. The two charges he faces are misdemeanors.

Authorities have video evidence depicting the acts in question after installing hidden cameras inside the spa, police officials said, adding that Kraft had been dropped off by a driver.

A spokesman for Kraft and the Patriots, Aaron Salkin, said in a statement, “We categorically deny that Mr. Kraft engaged in any illegal activity. Because it is a judicial matter, we will not be commenting further.”

Kraft could face discipline under the league’s personal conduct policy, which applies to team owners and prohibits “conduct detrimental to the integrity” of the NFL. In 2004, Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay was suspended six games and fined \$500,000 after he pleaded guilty to driving while on drugs.

In a statement, NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said, “The NFL is aware of the ongoing law enforcement matter and will continue to monitor developments.”

Kraft, who made his fortune buying out and building up



his father-in-law’s product-packaging business, is worth \$6.6 billion, according to Forbes magazine.

Since Kraft bought the Patriots 25 years ago for \$172 million, the team has become the most successful franchise in the NFL, appearing in 10 Super Bowls and winning six titles, including Super Bowl LIII on Feb. 3. The franchise is now worth an estimated \$3.7 billion, according to Forbes.

Kraft’s wife of many decades, Myra Hiatt Kraft, died in 2011 of ovarian cancer. He has not remarried.

Kraft is a close friend and supporter of U.S. President Donald Trump, who said told reporters in the Oval Office

that he was “very sad” to hear about the charges.

“I was very surprised to see it,” the president said. “He’s proclaimed his innocence totally. And - but I’m very surprised to see it.”

No one answered the phone at the Orchids of Asia Day Spa on Friday.

The spa’s website advertises body treatments, facials and massages, such as the “Tokyo Ultimate 4 Hand.” Standard services generally cost \$59 for a half hour and \$79 for an hour, police said.

The owner of Goodfella’s Pizza across the street, Joseph Bomparrito, 33, said he frequently saw young women who worked at the spa walking through the shopping plaza where it is located.

“They looked miserable, malnourished, very skinny, very pale with a depressed look on their face,” he said.

He also recalled seeing Kraft getting into a chauffeured car at the plaza about two weeks ago, saying he waved to Kraft and the Patriots owner waved back out of the car window.

Kraft, widely considered one of the NFL’s most powerful and influential owners, has become a hero to many Bostonians. Early this month hundreds of thousands of people lined the city’s streets to see the owner and his team celebrate their sixth Super Bowl win.

Some top Massachusetts officials on Friday voiced deep concern over the charges.

Governor Charles Baker “finds these allegations deeply disturbing and condemns all acts of sexual exploitation,” Anisha Chakrabarti, a spokeswoman for the governor, said in an email.

(Source: Reuters)

Iran eye FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup berth: Octavio

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Iran national beach soccer team coach Marco Octavio says they will participate at the Asian championship with the aim of booking a place in the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup.

Team Melli have been drawn in Group D along with Oman and Iraq in the 2019 AFC Beach Soccer Championship Thailand.

The second edition of the premier beach soccer championship in Asia will be an important competition as the top three teams will represent the Continent in the 2019 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay.

The AFC Beach Soccer Championship Thailand 2019 will be played in Pattaya from March 9-17, 2019.

“Without a doubt, we have an excellent team in the Asian championship. We’ve found 86 new players across the country and they took part in our training camps. It’s very important having young players for the future,” the Brazilian said in an interview with Iran Football Federation’s website.



“In my opinion, Iran beach soccer department moves in right direction and I hope the federation will support it more. The beach soccer department needs more support to launch a standard league,” Octavio added.

“Due to the fact that Iran beach soccer team have defeated the world’s giants, namely Brazil, Spain, Russia, Portugal and Italy, they need more support too. Beach soccer is very interesting for the Iranian people and I find out this matter when I meet them in the streets. From 2012 I started my job here, we have won nine international cups and I think the team deserve more,” Octavio stated.

“Now, we are focusing on the Asian championship because we want to qualify for the 2019 World Cup. However, we know that Team Melli have a difficult task ahead in Thailand. But we are well-prepared and our main goal is winning one of the three places. Iraq are a strong team and we don’t take anything for granted in Thailand,” the Brazilian coach concluded.

AFC President hails Japan football during visit



The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) President, Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, recently visited the headquarters of the Japan Football Association (JFA) in the capital, Tokyo.

Shaikh Salman met and congratulated Kohzo Tashima, the JFA President who sits on the FIFA Council and AFC Executive Committee, before being given a tour of the Association’s headquarters.

The AFC President said: “Japan is one of the leading football nations in Asia – something that they have demonstrated by winning the AFC Women’s Asian Cup in 2018 and finishing as runners-up in the men’s AFC Asian Cup which has just concluded in the United Arab Emirates.

“The men’s team were also one of a record number of five Asian nations that qualified for the FIFA World Cup in Russia and were the only one of those five that progressed into the second round of the competition – and came within a few minutes of

eliminating Belgium.”

“The success Japan enjoys at every level – they are AFC U-16 Champions and their women’s teams won the FIFA U-20 Women’s World Cup and took the silver medal at both the AFC Women’s Futsal Championship and the Youth Olympic Games – is down to hard work and great organization.

“In the last two years, their teams have also won the AFC Champions League – Urawa Red Diamonds in 2017 and last year Kashima Antlers lifted the trophy in Tehran. I was extremely happy to be able to congratulate my good friend, Kohzo Tashima, on the well-deserved success that the Japan FA and Japanese football has enjoyed.”

The Japan FA President said: “It is a huge pleasure and honor for us at the JFA to receive the AFC President. He has been close to Japanese football for a long time, since the time Junji Ogura was the President of the JFA.”

(Source: the-afc)

Australia coach Andrej Lemanis home for NBL finals, Caporn to coach



Australian Boomers coach Andrej Lemanis has been allowed to miss the team’s final FIBA World Cup qualifier to return home and prepare for the NBL semi-finals.

Lemanis coached a Boomers side with 10 debutantes to a convincing 81-60 win over Kazakhstan on Friday morning with the national side already qualified for the World Cup in China in September.

Basketball Australia announced on Saturday Lemanis would fly home to Brisbane to prepare his Brisbane Bullets for their semi-final series with Perth Wildcats starting on Thursday night in Perth.

Boomers assistant coach Adam Caporn will lead the side in their final qualifier against Iran in Tehran on Monday morning.

BA and NBL clubs have worked closely together during the two-year qualifying campaign as NBL-based players have filled most playing positions because NBA players are exempt from selection during the US season.

No senior players from finals teams were selected for this window of games although Sydney reserve guard Tom Wilson was handed his debut and played well

against Kazakhstan.

BA high performance general manager Jan Stirling said this game allowed for Caporn and assistant coach Luc Longley to test themselves. “Basketball Australia agrees that it is appropriate for Andrej to return to Australia in time for game one of the NBL semi-final series,” Stirling said.

“We are very appreciative towards the NBL who have been extremely co-operative throughout the qualifying process.

“This situation now provides the team an opportunity to manage the ‘what if’ theory of a head coach getting sick or being unable to coach during a major tournament so it will provide great preparation for all involved.”

Longley described Caporn as the best person to lead the team and Caporn said he looked forward to game time.

“The opportunity to contribute to the Boomers’ program as head coach is a great privilege and I’m looking forward to completing our World Cup qualification process with this terrific group of athletes and staff,” Caporn said.

(Source: SMH)

Dubai kicks off World Championship year

The World Para Athletics Grand Prix season gets underway in Dubai, United Arab Emirates on Sunday (24 February) with more than 430 athletes from nearly 50 countries set to take part in the first of eight Grand Prix this year.

The event takes place at the athletics stadium of the Dubai Club for People of Determination – the same venue that will host the 2019 World Championships in just over eight months’ time.

Three female Para athletes from Saudi Arabia will compete at the Dubai Grand Prix – the first time that women from the Middle Eastern country will compete in the series.

Sarah Aljumaah lines up in the 100m T36 and the shot put F36; Amal Alahammari takes on the discus and shot put F37 and Zahra Al Tala competes in the discus and club throw F51.

■ Sprints

Having announced his retirement from athletics after winning Commonwealth gold last April, Australian Evan O’Hanlon is back on the track with his sights now set on defending his world title in November.

The 30-year-old, currently living in the Czech Republic with his wife and young daughter, took up bobsleigh last year but clearly can’t leave the track behind him just yet.

Another Australian to watch out for is Chad Perris, who lines up in the 100m T13, while Scott Reardon will face his big rival Atsushi Yamamoto of Japan in the men’s 100m T63.

All three London 2017 world medallists – Rheed McCracken, Mohamed Alhammedi, and Walid Ktila – take on the men’s 100m T34 with the trio also contesting the 800m T34 together, while in the men’s 100m T51, Peter Genyn, Toni Piispanen and Mohamed



Berrahal do battle once again.

Top British sprinters Sophie Hahn (T38) and Maria Lyle (T35) open their season in Dubai. Hahn faces Germany’s Lindy Ave, double silver medallist behind the Briton at Berlin 2018.

Turkey’s T53 racer Hamide Dogangun (Kurt), who won two European titles last year, is also in Dubai.

■ Distance

The men’s T54 field features the likes of Marcel Hug – who races the 100m, 400m, 800m, 1500m and 5,000m – and Tunisia’s Yassine Gharbi, who was in winning form at the Sharjah Open earlier this week. Germany’s Alhassane Balde and Japanese duo Tomoki Suzuki and Sho Watanabe also line up.

Australia’s T53 wheelchair athlete Madison de Rozario – a double gold medallist at last year’s Commonwealth Games – takes on the 800m, 1500m and 5,000m T54. Watch out for her teammate Angie Ballard too.

Algeria’s Paralympic and world champion Abdelatif Baka competes in the men’s 1,500m and 5,000m T13 – his first time racing the longer distance. Compatriots and fellow world medallists Samir Nouioua (T46) and Madjid Djemai (T37) also compete in Dubai.

Great Britain’s Paralympic champion Paul Blake returns to action after injury last year in the 400m and the 800m T36.

■ Field

Fresh from winning gold at the IWAS World Games earlier this month, Algeria’s six-time world champion Lahouari Bahlaz looks the one to beat in the men’s shot put F32, while Iraq’s Paralympic and world champion Garrah Tnaish heads the field in the shot put F40.

Mounia Gasmi also won gold at the IWAS World Games and takes on the women’s shot put and club throw F32.

World gold and silver medallists Kamel Kardjena of Algeria and Germany’s Daniel Scheil go head-to-head again in the shot put F33. The women’s event features Algeria’s reigning world champion Asmahane Boudjadar.

All three world medallists in the men’s javelin F54 are in action – Greek Manolis Stefanoudakis, Iraqi Hamed Amir and Belarusian Aliaksandr Tryputis, who won earlier this week in Sharjah.

Vanessa Low returns to action in the women’s long jump T61 after time out recovering from a back injury; South Africa’s young star Ntando Mahlangu competes in the men’s long jump as well as the 200m T61.

In the javelin events, watch out for New Zealand’s Holly Robinson (F46) and Norway’s Ida Nesse (F44), who will be hoping to continue her run of form after setting a new European record of 35.74m in Sharjah.

(Source: Paralympic.org)

Persepolis held by Naft Masjed Soleyman: IPL

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Persepolis football team were held to a goalless draw by Naft Masjed Soleyman in Iran Professional League (IPL) on Saturday.

In the match held in Behnam Mohammadi’s Stadium, two teams played a lackluster match.

Persepolis moved up to second place with this result.

Sepahan have the same points but sit top due to a better goal difference. “I am satisfied with the way we did against Naft Masjed Soleyman. It was very difficult to play in this turf. Also, our experienced defenders Jalal Hosseini and Shoja Khalilzadeh were absent in this match due to injury,” Persepolis coach Branko Ivankovic said.

Azmoun named UEFA Europa League Player of the Week

Press TV — In Russia, a tremendous contribution by Sardar Azmoun has led Zenit Saint Petersburg to cruise past Turkish club Fenerbaache with a 3-2 victory on aggregate.

The Iranian International celebrated his wonderful night with an impressive assist and two goals that earned him the Player of the Week in the Europa League.

Iranian center Haddadi joins Champville basketball club

TASNIM — Iran international center Hamed Haddadi has joined Lebanese basketball club Champville.

The 218-cm former NBA center had also been linked with a move to Homenetmen but opted to join Champville.

Haddadi was without a team after parting company with his Chinese club Xinjiang Flying Tigers.

He was Iran’s big absent against Japan, where Team Melli lost to the East Asian team 97-89 in the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2019 Asian qualifier on Thursday.

Haddadi started his playing career in Iranian club Shahin Ahvaz in 1999 and joined Memphis Grizzlies in 2008 and played in the NBA team for five years.

Iran to play friendly with Belarus in Tehran

IRNA — Women’s national football teams of Iran and Belarus will hold friendly matches in early March in Tehran.

According to the website of Iran’s Football Federation, Belarus will arrive in Tehran on March 1 and the two teams will play two friendly matches on March 2 and 5. Both matches will be held at Tehran’s Ararat Stadium at 11:00 AM local time. The Iranian team prepare for the second round of 2020 AFC Women’s Olympic Qualifying Tournament which is going to be held in April.

Iran wrestlers to attend Hungry Grand Prix

IRNA — Iranian Greco-Roman wrestlers are scheduled to attend Hungarian Grand Prix - Polyak Imre Memorial which will be held in Győr, Hungary.

Some 11 Iranian wrestlers will participate in the weight categories of 55, 63, 72, 82, 97, 60, 67, 77, 87 and 130 kg.

Wrestlers from Algeria, Belarus, Chile, China, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland Georgia, Germany, Italy, Moldova, Norway, Romani, Slovakia, Sweden, Ukraine and the US will participate in the event.

Imre Polyak was a featherweight Greco-Roman wrestler from Hungary. He competed in the 1952, 1956, 1960 and 1964 Olympics and won three silver and one gold medal. He won the world title in 1955, 1958 and 1962, and placed second in 1961 and 1963.

Iran to host World Volleyball League

IRNA — Iran will host the 2019 FIVB Volleyball Nations League, said the caretaker of the Volleyball Federation of Iran on Saturday.

The league will be held in the northwestern cities of Ardebil and Orumiye late spring, with participation of Russia, Poland, Canada and Iran, said Afshin Davari.

Saying that Iran’s volleyball has advanced in the past decade, Davari added that in the world rankings, Iran’s U15 team holds the first, U16 team the fourth, U17 team the sixth, and national team the eighth places.

He said that playing against Japan, Iran got points with a lot of difficulties, but it is an established power in Asia, adding 13 Iranian volleyball players play in big leagues, like those of Europe.

China PR set for international challenge

Reigning champions Uruguay will return to defend their crown in the 2019 China Cup International Championship as host China PR kickstart their preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers.

The third edition of the China Cup will run from March 21-25 in Nanning, southern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region with China PR set take on Thailand on March 21, while Uruguay will open their title defence against Uzbekistan the following day.

China PR defeated Thailand 2-1 in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 Round of 16 and a repeat performance will see Team Dragon advance to the China Cup final for the first time.

Jointly organised by the Chinese Football Association, the Guangxi Sports Bureau and the Wanda Group, this year’s tournament will serve as a warm-up for Team Dragon, whose focus will be the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers, which kick-off in September.

(Source: the-afc)

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**GUIDE TO
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING**

Avoid boasting and refrain from pride and unruliness, and always remember your grave.

Imam Ali (AS)

Puppets to recount Sheikh Sanan tragedy from “Conference of the Birds”

A R T **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Behruz Gharibpur’s Aran Theater Troupe will perform an opera puppet show titled “Love” based on the Sheikh Sanan tragedy from Persian poet Attar Neyshaburi’s “The Conference of the Birds” at Tehran’s Ferdowsi Hall tonight.



A scene from the “Love” opera puppet show by Iranian director Behruz Gharibpur. (Tasnim/Nasser Jafari)

The story is about Sanan’s love for a Christian girl, who forces the sheikh to do things against his beliefs and religion. Vocalist Davud Azad will lend his voice to Sheikh Sanan’s character and Shora Karimi is the composer of the opera. Over 20 singers, including Roshanak Keymanesh, Arash Khanzadi, Roham Khorshidvand, Sina Sazgari and Mohsen Mohebbi, will be collaborating in this production. Gharibpur has previously staged the opera puppet shows “Ashura”, “Macbeth”, “Rustam and Sohrab”, “Rumi”, “Hafez” and “Sadi”.

Keyhan Kalhor to perform “Silent City” in Tehran

A R T **TEHRAN** — Acclaimed Iranian kamancheh virtuoso Keyhan Kalhor plans to go on stage in Tehran to perform tracks from his album “Silent City”.



Iranian kamancheh virtuoso Keyhan Kalhor performs in an undated photo.

1988 chemical attack on Halabja.

The concerts will be held at Tehran’s Vahdat Hall during April, he said in press release on Saturday. A number of Iranian musicians, including violinists Pedram Faryusefi and Nilufar Mohebi, viola player Meisam Marvasti and cellist Atena Eshtiaqi, will accompany him during the performances. “Silent City” is a 30-minute track from an album of the same name recorded by Kalhor and the New York-based string quartet Brooklyn Rider at World Village Records in 2008. “Silent City” was composed in memory of the victims of Iraq’s

Omar Nasiri’s “Inside the Jihad” published in Persian

CULTURE **TEHRAN** — “Inside the Jihad: My Life with Al Qaeda”, the memoirs of the Belgian spy of Moroccan origin Omar Nasiri has recently been published in Persian in Tehran.

The book was translated by Vahid Khazab and released by Shahid Kazemi Publications in Tehran. Nasiri infiltrated into Al-Qaeda from 1994 to 2000, attending training camps in Afghanistan and passing information to the UK and French intelligence services.

“23 Individuals” tops at Qoqnus Screen Awards

1 → The awards ceremony was organized at Tehran’s Sarcheshmeh Cultural Complex where “Blood Trap” by Mohammad-Hossein Mahdavian, a sequel to his 2017 acclaimed movie “Midday Event”, was picked as second best film. Mahdavian was also selected as the Revolutionary Cinema Figure of the Year. Film critic and scholar Majid Shah-Hosseini was also honored for his lifetime achievements.

Metal engraving of Quran verses sells for over \$1.8 million at Baran Auction

A R T **TEHRAN** — A metal engraving featuring verses of the Holy Quran has fetched 77 billion rials (over \$1.8 million) during the Baran Auction, which is dedicated to the sale of inscription impressions and calligraphy works. The engraving was created by Ali-Akbar Khanzadeh on two gold-plated bronze sheets, each of which measures 180 by 147 cm.

The organizers said that the artwork is the most expensive item ever sold at an Iranian auction. Sixty-eight artworks were offered at the auction held at Tehran’s Rayzan International Conference Center on Friday evening. It took in over 117 billion rials (over \$2.8 million) as 19 items failed to find buyers. Last year, an original manuscript of the Holy



Employees present a metal engraving featuring verses of the Holy Quran during the Baran Auction at Tehran’s Rayzan International Conference Center on February 22, 2019. The artwork was the first top seller fetching over \$1.8 million. (Honaronline/Ramona Mirian)

Quran inscribed by Ali-Asgar Arsanjani from the Qajar period was the most expensive item, which sold at 2 billion rials (about \$48,000) during the

Baran Auction. Mahbubeh Kazemi Dulabi is the founder and CEO of the auction, which was launched September 30, 2016.

Iran’s “Lotus” wins Big Sky artistic vision award



“Lotus” by Mohammadreza Vatandoost.

A R T **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Mohammadreza Vatandoost’s acclaimed film “Lotus” won the mini-doc artistic vision award at the 16th Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in the U.S. city of Missoula, Montana, the organizers announced on Friday.

The doc tells the story of an old woman who is waiting for a permit to enter an island to visit her son’s grave. “We chose to give an artistic vision award to one film whose artistry and craftsmanship stood out,” the jury said in its statement. “For its controlled and intentional use of pacing, natural light, and mise-en-scène; its disciplined focus on one woman’s painfully

patient, singular mission; and its innovative subjective motifs rich with symbolism and emotion, we give this award to ‘Lotus,’” it added. “Pariah Dog” by American filmmaker was selected as best feature documentary while the feature artistic vision award went to “Dark Eden” co-directed by Jasmin Herold and Michael Beamish from Germany. “Scenes from a Dry City” by Simon Wood and Francois Verster from South Africa was picked as best mini-documentary and “St. Louis Superman” by Smriti Mundhra and Sami Khan from the U.S. won the award for best short documentary. “The Blessing” by American filmmaker Hunter Robert Baker and Jordan Fein won the Big Sky Award.

Fox cuts Smollett’s character from “Empire” after arrest

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Fox is cutting Jussie Smollett’s character from its popular hip-hop drama “Empire” after the actor was arrested and accused of staging a hoax hate crime attack on himself, show officials said on Friday.

The move came a day after the 36-year-old was charged with lying to Chicago police about the allegedly staged incident, in which he said two masked men beat him and slung a noose around his neck while yelling racist abuse.

Smollett’s character, Jamal Lyon, will be removed from the final two episodes of the current season of Empire, according to 20th Century Fox Television, which said it wanted to avoid “further disruption” on the set of the show.

Smollett faces up to three years in prison if convicted in the case, which has become fodder for the culture wars that have roiled the United States since Donald Trump’s 2016 election.

“The events of the past few weeks have been incredibly emotional for all of us,” Empire’s co-creators and producers said in a statement. “While these allegations are very disturbing, we are placing our trust in the legal system as the process plays out.”

Lawyers for Smollett did not respond to a request for comment on Friday. On Wednesday, they said they were conducting a thorough investigation to form an aggressive defense.

According to court documents, the black actor wrote a personal check for \$3,500 to two brother and gave them \$100 to buy the rope, ski masks, gloves and red baseball caps that were used in the supposed attack on Jan. 29.

Police said Smollett hoped the incident would advance his career and secure him a higher salary.



Jussie Smollett exits Cook County Department of Corrections after posting bail in Chicago, Illinois, U.S., February 21, 2019. (Reuters/Joshua Lott)

Detectives interviewed more than 100 people, reviewed footage from more than 55 surveillance cameras, and executed more than 50 search warrants during the investigation. Officials did not spell out how Smollett had hoped to boost his salary by staging such a hoax.

A judge set bail at \$100,000 on Thursday and ordered Smollett to surrender his passport. He was released after paying 10 percent of the bail amount as stipulated by the judge.

According to an unnamed source cited by CNN, Smollett apologized to the cast and crew on the set of Empire late on Thursday, but maintained that he is innocent.

While Smollett initially received an outpouring of support on social media from fans, celebrities and some politicians, others were skeptical about the attack, which he said took place outside his Chicago apartment at 2 a.m. on a frigid night.

Among those who supported the actor were Democratic presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Kirsten Gillibrand. On Thursday, Harris said in a statement she was “sad, frustrated and disappointed” by the latest reports. Gillibrand said she will wait to find out the facts before making another statement.

Image of the Year Celebration opens at Iranian Artists Forum



Art aficionados visit the exhibition of the Image of the Year Celebration at the Iranian Artists Forum in Tehran on February 22, 2019. (Honaronline/Ramona Mirian)

A R T **TEHRAN** — The 16th edition of the Image of the Year Celebration was inaugurated on Friday at the Iranian Artists Forum with unveiling three books containing stills of three acclaimed films of the history of Iranian cinema.

Dariussh Mehrjui’s 1969 cult film “The Cow”, Nasser Taqvai’s 1987 drama “Captain Khorshid” and French filmmaker Albert Lamorisse’s 1978 documentary “The Lovers’ Wind” about the landscape of Iran are the films, which had the chance to be photographed.

The stills have been selected by the director of the celebration, Seifollah Samadian. The three books have been published by

Tasvir-e Iran Publications. Filmmaker Reza Mirkarimi, also attending the ceremony, said that he has had the honor to be friends with Samadian for years, and added, “The idea of publishing the images of these three films was a great idea. Mehrjui was extremely surprised to see the images of his film.” The ceremony was concluded by screening Mirkarimi’s “Qasre Shirin”. “Qasre Shirin” won the Crystal Simorgh for its screenwriters Mohsen Qarai and Mohammad Davudi at the 37th Fajr Film Festival this year. The closing ceremony of the celebration will take place on March 8 honoring the winners.

Movies with a message make impact beyond Oscars glitz

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — The movie “Green Book” explores racial inequality, “Roma” reveals the emotional toll placed on domestic workers, and “RBG” chronicles the fight for women’s rights.

The messages in the three Academy Awards contenders are no accident. All were produced and financed by Participant Media, a pioneer among a group of companies aiming to advance social missions through movies.

Participant was founded in 2004 by billionaire and former eBay President Jeff Skoll. The company’s credits range from Al Gore’s climate-change documentary “An Inconvenient Truth” and Steven Spielberg’s historical drama “Lincoln” to “Spotlight”, a best picture winner about journalists who exposed a cover-up of abuse by Catholic priests.

“We often gravitate toward stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, becoming leaders for change in their own and others’ lives,” Participant Media Chief Executive David Linde said by email.

“Roma” is a prime example, Linde said. The black-and-white drama, which was distributed by Netflix Inc, revolves around Cleo, an indigenous Mexican housekeeper who displays courage in the face of serious challenges.

It will compete at the Oscars on Sunday for best picture with “Green Book,” a Participant movie released by Comcast Corp’s Universal Pictures about a black pianist on a 1962 concert tour of the segregated U.S. South. “RBG,” about U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, is up for best documentary.

Participant’s movies are paired with off-screen activism. For “Roma,” the company joined the National Domestic Workers Alliance to push for labor protections and supported the launch of an app that



Yalitza Aparicio stars as Cleo in this handout still from the movie “Roma”. (Reuters/Netflix/Handout)

provides benefits to house cleaners such as paid time off.

Scott Budnick, who quit his career producing comedies such as “The Hangover” to advocate for prison reform, is also working to spark change through compelling and commercially successful entertainment.

His new company, One Community, is aiming to raise \$10 million to mount a year-long campaign around the January 2020 release of the film “Just Mercy,” a biographical drama starring Michael B. Jordan as a lawyer fighting to free a man wrongly convicted of murder.

The campaign is expected to kick off within the next two months and will be designed to prompt changes on issues such as the death penalty and juvenile sentencing, Budnick said in an interview.

One Community, which is co-financing “Just Mercy” with AT&T Inc’s Warner Bros., “is the branch between philanthropy and politics to the entertainment community,” he said.

While many philanthropists and politicians want to tackle problems such as poverty or homelessness, “they are never aligned with a major studio that may be spending \$20, \$40 or \$60 million to sell that issue to the public,” Budnick said.

“We’re here to be that aligner,” he said.