



**Economic war harder than Saddam war against Iran in 1980s** **2**



**Envoy says Rouhani to meet Ayatollah Sistani in landmark Iraq trip** **2**



**Persepolis winger Mehdi Torabi a doubt for Al Sadd match** **15**



**Image of the Year honors cartoonist Derambakhsh** **16**

# Rouhani calls for closer Tehran-Baku ties



See page 2

## VP inaugurates 2 major industrial projects in Semnan province

**TEHRAN** — In a one-day trip to Semnan province on Saturday, First Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri put two major industrial projects into operation in the west of the province, IRNA reported.

The official inaugurated the largest privately-funded metal production unit of the country in Fajr 2 Industrial Estate in Aradan County.

This unit was established in 100 hectares of land through 1.3 trillion rials (about \$30.9 million) of investment, it has the annual production capacity of 66,000 tons of lead and copper and provides jobs for 300 persons.

The project for setting up this unit was aimed at development of major economic infrastructure in domestic car industry and defense sector, as well as expansion of exports. **→4**

## Iran to ease visa rules for Iraqi Kurdistan travelers

**TEHRAN** — Iran is to loosen travel restrictions for Iraqi Kurdistan travelers in the hope of boosting tourism by offering electronic visas instead of printed ones.

"Electronic visa will soon replace paper visas," Iranian consul general in Erbil Morteza Ebadi said, ANA reported.

"Print copies of visas have been done away with, meaning that now we will no longer waste a passport page by sticking visas on them," Ebadi told Rudaw on Friday. "Entrance and exit stamps will no longer exist," he added.

Applicants would receive confirmation they have been granted a visa from the consulate in Erbil but nothing will be inserted into their passports, Ebadi explained. "They can also apply online," he added. **→10**

## Germany refuses to blacklist Hezbollah: report

Germany has refused to follow Britain's lead in designating the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah as a terrorist organization despite pressures from Saudi Arabia and the United States, a senior official says.

The decision was announced on Friday by Minister of State Niels Annen in an interview with weekly news magazine Der Spiegel after his visit to Lebanon.

Annen described Hezbollah as "a relevant factor in Lebanese society", and said Germany "was interested in Lebanese stability."

Berlin made the decision despite the fact that it may fuel tensions with Saudi Arabia and the United States, which have been pressurizing their allies to ban the Lebanese movement. **→13**

## Iran is losing regional and world gas market: energy expert

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**  
By Payman Yazdani

**TEHRAN** — Touching upon the necessity of Iran's more active foreign and energy diplomacy to keep and increase its share in regional and world gas market, Omid Shokri believes Iran is even losing Turkey's gas market.

In near future, gas refineries of phases 13, 22,

and 24 of South Pars will be inaugurated officially. This means Iran's greater share of gas field against its rival Qatar, but situation of Iranian gas exports is not very good.

To know more about the issue we reached out to Washington-based Senior Energy Security Analyst Omid Shokri Kalehsar. He is currently serving as a Visiting Research Scholar in the Schar, School of Policy and Government at George Mason University.

■ Why Iran has not been successful in exporting gas despite its success in gas production so that the project of exporting Iranian gas to Pakistan and Oman have not been fruitful after many years?

A: Exporting natural gas to neighbors is Iran's priority. According to strategy of Ministry of Oil, after all phases of South Pars will be online, Iran would be able to exports about 200 mcm natural gas to neighbors. **→7**

## Int'l Women's Day: Celebrating women's resilience in the face of adversity

By Syed Zafar Mehdi

**TEHRAN** — On Friday, February 08, International Women's Day was observed across the world with a solemn pledge to espouse the cause of women's empowerment and women's rights.

The day was marked by street rallies, conferences, award ceremonies, protests and lengthy statements from world leaders, human rights campaigners and others.

Social media was flooded with messages from netizens, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the achievements of women and addressing the challenges that persist.

In Western countries, the day is marked every year with tremendous fanfare, even though terms like 'women's empowerment' and 'women's rights' have different connotations there, which most often are not in sync with the ideas of empowerment, freedom and rights in our part of the world.

In Middle East and South Asia, the day often reminds of women's day-to-day struggles and the kind of insurmountable odds they have to overcome to achieve their dreams.

In most of these countries, the challenges facing women are primarily because of foreign invasions, military occupations, age-old stereotypes and denial of basic rights.

Yet, these gritty women have smashed odds and made their presence felt in different spheres. "Happy International Women's Day for Palestinian women who have fought Israeli apartheid, brutality, and aggression with their bare hands," tweeted 'Women for Palestine', with hashtag #FreePalestine. **→6**

## Hamas and new mistake

By Damir Nazarov

**WEST SIBERIA/ TYUMEN** — The new Hamas leadership, under the command of Yahya Sinwar, has never concealed that one of the top priorities in the foreign policy of the Palestinian movement will be the resumption of relations with the Axis of Resistance. While relations with Tehran and Hezbollah are more or less restored and closer to

the former status quo (despite all the problems between the parties since 2011, contacts have never been terminated), relations with Syria need to be reset, which seems to be a matter of time.

However, there is no saying that Hamas does enjoy the same level of confidence from the representatives of the Resistance alliance. In turn, Hamas itself is in no hurry to restore its status

in the camp of the main military-political allies under the auspices of the IRGC, hinting an alliance with Qatar and Turkey is also "important" to the Palestinian organization. It is clear that the main obstacles to relations between Hamas and the Axis of Resistance are yet to pass, and in this regard everything will depend on the leadership of the Palestinian party. **→7**



© Tehran Times/ Behnam Tolfighi

## Women's motorcycle racing held in Azadi

**TEHRAN** - The first edition of Iran's women's high-speed moto racing was held in Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Friday.

A total of 22 participants competed in three classes.

Behnaz Shafiei from Tehran Province came first in 250 CC class, while Azadeh Gilani from Gilan Province finished in the first place at Mini GP 8.

Also, Nillofer Royatvand from Alborz Province came first at 125 CC class.



### PERSPECTIVE

**Hanif Ghaffari**  
Political analyst

## Sanders will criticize Trump

Of course, during the upcoming presidential elections in the United States, there will be a lot of criticism from the White House and the U.S. president. This is a matter of great concern to Donald Trump. On the other hand, Democratic Party elections will begin shortly. The common point of all candidates for this election is criticism of Trump's policies.

Bernie Sanders, the old American senator, and one of Democratic nominees for the 2020 presidential election, continues to oppose U.S. President Donald Trump. This confrontation started at the time Trump entered the White House (by early 2017). Sanders called for an end to Washington's support for Riyadh in the Yemeni war. Sanders also condemned Trump's stance on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. At any rate, Sanders's recent position against Trump has led to the U.S. President's concerns.

Sen. Bernie Sanders says it would be an "impeachable offense" if President Trump were to fire Robert Mueller the special counsel leading the federal probe into ties between Trump campaign associates and Russia.

"I've been very reluctant to talk about impeachment until we have all the information coming in from the investigation. But that would be a major, major, major obstruction of justice. That would be an impeachable offense in my view," Sanders said in an interview for The Intercept's newly launched podcast "Deconstructed" released Friday.

In his tweet, Sanders was referring Jeff Sessions, Trump's Justice Minister, and his forced resignation. Trump fired Attorney General Jeff Sessions, replacing him with a loyalist who has echoed the president's complaints about the special counsel investigation into Russia's election interference and will now take charge of the inquiry.

Among all Democrat candidates, Sanders has a lot of motivation to challenge the trump! The fact is, according to polls conducted in 2016, Sanders had a much greater chance of winning the U.S. presidential elections. Many Democratic voters believed that Sanders could have an important role in regulating power in America as a symbol of change in the United States. Although such an idea was wrong due to the political structure in the U.S., it was, however, strongly accepted by some Democrat supporters. **→7**



### ARTICLE

**Syed Zafar Mehdi**  
Journalist  
from New Delhi

## Netanyahu's political honeymoon over

With just a month to go until general elections in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu's legal troubles

have compounded, making his re-election bid difficult. Israel's attorney general Avichai Mandelblit dropped a bombshell last week and the timing was impeccable: just before Netanyahu seeks fifth term in office. The announcement, which was being anticipated for two years, has dealt a massive blow to Netanyahu, who is likely to be indicted in three separate cases of corruption.

The criminal cases include granting favors worth millions of dollars to the owner of a media outlet in lieu of favorable coverage for himself, according to reports. The charges have been numbered as Case 1000, Case 2000 and Case 4000. Natan Sachs, Director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, writing in the Atlantic said Netanyahu not only faces the personal threat of indictment on serious felonies, but his political maneuver itself is in jeopardy.

"The first polls out following the announcement show a slim lead for the center-left camp. If these results hold, Netanyahu's path back to the prime minister's residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem would be blocked," said Sachs.

Netanyahu, who heads right-wing Likud party, has served consecutive terms as the Zionist entity's prime minister since 2009. It is apparently the first time a sitting prime minister in Israel will face criminal charges.

Although experts say that he will do everything at his command to subvert the law and declare himself 'not guilty', odds are heavily against him at the moment, especially with elections on April 9.

In Case 1000, Netanyahu is accused of accepting illegal gifts from a Hollywood filmmaker, totaling about \$200,000, in exchange of helping him secure a U.S. visa and back a law that would give the filmmaker tax exemption if he moves back to Israel.

In Case 2000, Netanyahu faces indictment for supporting a law that would crush one newspaper (Israel Hayom) in exchange for a favorable coverage from its rival newspaper (Yediot Acharonot). **→6**



MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



Five world leaders tried to mediate between Iran, U.S.: President

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — President Hassan Rouhani said on Thursday that in the current Iranian calendar year (March 201-March 2019) five world leaders tried to arrange talks between Iran and the United States but he rejected the offers, citing the wrong time and conditions.

Talking at a session of the Administrative Council of Gilan Province, Rouhani also said Iran is in economic and psychological war with the U.S.

The president censured the U.S. for imposing sanctions against the Islamic Republic, saying by doing so Washington isolated itself, not Iran.

Even the United States' European allies are against the restrictions, he added.



Larijani: U.S. after harming Iran-Bulgaria ties

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani on Saturday criticized the U.S. for trying to harm Iran-Bulgaria relations, saying Bulgaria's parliament can play an active role in expanding economic ties between the two states.

Larijani made the remarks in a meeting with Vice Chairperson of the National Assembly of Bulgaria Veselin Mareshki, Mehr reported.

For his part, Mareshki said unfortunately some countries are after undermining Iran-Bulgaria relations but they will not succeed.

He said the two sides should improve bilateral ties in spite of such interferences, adding that his country is seeking long-term ties with Iran.



Hungarian minister: Iran enjoys rich culture and civilization

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — Miklos Kasler, the Hungarian minister of human capacities, said on Friday that Iran enjoys a rich culture, history and civilization.

During a meeting with Iran's Ambassador to Budapest Gholam Ali Rajabi Yazdi, Kasler said that Hungary supports expansion of relations and cooperation with Iran.

He also praised efforts being made by the Iranian embassy in area of culture, saying the publication of leading Iranian books has provided an opportunity for the Hungarian people to be familiar with the Iranian culture and civilization.

Rajabi Yazdi presented a report of the measures taken for expanding cooperation in cultural, scientific and educational areas.



Tehran University remembers Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — The University of Tehran hosted a conference on Saturday to commemorate the senior Iraqi Shia cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq who was assassinated in a bomb attack in Najaf in 2003.

Speaking at the conference, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, "Martyr Hakim was a prominent example of Islamic ethics and a Mujahid whose morality was both good and fatherly."

Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Iraqi National Wisdom Movement, also spoke at the event, saying Baqir al-Hakim is deeply missed in Iraq and the Muslim world, Fars reported.



Iranian consul general visits Turkey's Van

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — Iran's consul general in Turkey's Erzurum visited Van Province to discuss issues related to providing services to Iranian tourists during Norouz holidays with local officials.

At separate meetings on Friday, Sadjad Soltanzadeh met with a number of local officials in the province, including Van's governor, Saray District governor, director of Kapikoy Customs, and Iranian people residing in the province, IRNA reported.

The consul general also discussed issues related to services to Iranian tourists with officials of Van.

Iranian tourists constitute a major part of Van visitors, particularly during the two-week holidays of Norouz (beginning on March 21).



U.S. sanctions are 'crime against humanity', expert says

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — A senior international law expert and former Iranian ambassador to UN bodies in Vienna says the economic pressure imposed by the United States against Iran is a "crime against humanity".

In an article published by the Arman newspaper on Saturday, Ali Khorram said the Iranian people are entitled to file a lawsuit against the U.S. in international courts and tribunals for such a crime.

Khorram also criticized U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's comment that the sanctions are aimed to protect the Iranian people's freedom.

"This is while the sanctions directly target the Iranian people's right to live and their freedom," he added.

# Six foreign ambassadors submit credentials to Iranian president

Chabahar port has turned into symbol of cooperation between Iran and India



Indian ambassador



Iraqi ambassador



Congolese ambassador



Maltese ambassador



Burmese ambassador



Burkinabe ambassador

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — On Saturday President Hassan Rouhani received credentials of the new ambassadors of Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Congo, Malta, India and Iraq.

During a meeting with Gaddam Dharmendra, the new ambassador of India to Tehran, Rouhani said that Chabahar port has turned into a symbol of cooperation between the two countries.

He also attached great importance to expansion of ties with India as a friendly country.

Rouhani also called for speeding up implementation of agreements between the two countries in energy sphere.

For his part, Ambassador Dharmendra said that India seeks expansion of relations with Tehran.

■ 'Iran-Iraq ties are exemplary'

During a meeting with Abdul-Rahman Saad Jawad Qandeel, the new Baghdad's ambassador to Tehran, Rouhani said that Iran-Iraq ties are "exemplary" in the region. He added that Iran will stand beside the Iraqi government and people.

The Iraqi diplomat said that Baghdad seeks to expand relations with neighboring Iran. Rouhani is planned to visit Iraq in the near future.

■ 'Iran determined to expand relations with Congo'

In the meeting with Joseph Okio, the new ambassador of Congo to Iran, Rouhani said that Iran is determined to expand relations with Congo.

Both countries' capacities should be used in line with expanding ties, he added.

■ 'Europe should compensate for U.S. withdrawal from nuclear deal'

In a meeting with Paul Mifsud, Malta's new ambassador to Tehran, Rouhani said that Europe should compensate for the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

For his part, Ambassador Mifsud expressed his country's support for preserving the JCPOA.

On May 8, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump officially withdrew his country from the international nuclear deal and reinstituted sanctions against Iran.

■ Rouhani hopes Rohingya Muslims would return to their country

In a meeting with the new ambassador of Myanmar to Tehran, Rouhani expressed hope

that the Rohingya Muslims would return to their country.

"Stability and security in a country can be reached through cooperation among all the ethnicities and groups," the president remarked.

He also discussed expansion of relations with Myanmar with the ambassador.

■ 'Iran attaches importance to ties with African countries'

During a meeting with new ambassador of Burkina Faso, Rouhani said that his country attaches importance to ties with African countries and is making efforts to realize this goal.

Rouhani also held a separate meeting with Bahram Qassemi and Mohammad Taghi Saberi, the new ambassadors of Iran to France and Tajikistan.

## Envoy says Rouhani to meet Ayatollah Sistani in landmark Iraq trip

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — Iran's ambassador to Iraq says President Hassan Rouhani will be meeting Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in his next week's trip to Iraq.

Speaking on Saturday, Iraj Masjedi said Rouhani's three-day trip which will start on Monday will be a "turning point" in the history of Tehran-Baghdad relations.

The ambassador said Rouhani will be leading a delegation of senior officials to Baghdad with the aim to push for stronger ties in political, economic, and cultural arenas between the two neighboring nations.

Some agreements are set to be reached during the trip, including the Khorramshahr-Basra railway, development of industrial zones, visa issues, customs relations, cooperation in the health sector, and the 1975 Algiers Agreement.

The 1975 Algiers Agreement (commonly known as the Algiers Accord, sometimes as the Algiers Declaration) was an agreement between Iran and Iraq to settle their border disputes and conflicts (such as the Arvand Rud), and it served as basis for the bilateral treaties signed on 13 June and 26 December 1975.

"The issue at hand is the operationalization of the Algiers agreement, be-



cause the implementation of the pact should kick off and measures such as the dredging of the Arvand Rud, unloading of sunken ships, and revitalization of Khorramshahr, Abadan, and Basra ports should be taken," the Iranian diplomat said.

Masjedi also said Iran is requesting revocation of visa between the two countries, however the Iraqi government is not ready to do that due to security concerns and lack of necessary infrastructure.

He pointed out that Iraq is currently the biggest market for Iranian businesses, adding that attempt is being made to improve trade ties between the two countries to \$20 billion per year, up from the current level of \$12 billion.

Iraqi officials in November 2018 said that Iraq had agreed with Iran to exchange Iraqi food items for Iranian gas and energy supplies.

## Rouhani calls for closer Tehran-Baku ties

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — President Hassan Rouhani has said relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan are expanding in different fields, underlining the need to strengthen them.

Rouhani made the remarks in a meeting with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan Elmar Mammadyarov in Tehran on Saturday.

The president also voiced Iran's willingness to boost trilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan and Russia by carrying out various joint projects, Mehr reported.

He pointed to the opportunities for cooperation between Tehran and Baku in the energy industry and construction of dams and power plants.

For his part, Mammadyarov hailed the "brotherly" relations between Tehran and Baku, saying there are no obstacles to the enhancement of political, economic, cultural and social ties with Tehran.

He also conveyed an official invitation from Azeri President Ilham Aliyev to Rouhani to attend the next Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conference in Baku.

Heading a diplomatic delegation, Mammadyarov also met his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif to exchange views on bilateral issues and regional developments.

The Azeri foreign minister also met Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council.

During the meeting, Mammadyarov re-



Mammadyarov (L) shakes hands with Shamkhani

affirmed that his country will maintain close economic ties with Tehran irrespective of the sanctions.

He voiced Azerbaijan's willingness to expand relations with Iran in all fields, saying Baku welcomes any initiative to that end.

Shamkhani said Iran and Azerbaijan are determined to broaden bilateral relations, particularly in economic fields, adding that closer interaction would contribute to regional security and stability.

He emphasized that the friendly relations between the two Muslim neighbors do not pose a threat to any other country and would never be influenced by others.

In recent years, Tehran and Baku have developed close ties in different fields such as defense and economy.

Iran and Azerbaijan have also been working on a key North-South transport corridor, which is expected to connect Northern Europe to Southeast Asia through their territories.

## Army chief says economic war is harder than Saddam's war against Iran in 1980s

General Mousavi describes economic war on Iran as "one of the most complicated and difficult wars"

**POLITICS** **TEHRAN** — Iranian Army Commander Abdolrahim Mousavi said on Saturday that the economic war waged against Iran by the Trump administration is one of the "most complicated and difficult wars", saying it is even harder than Saddam Hussein's war against Iran in the 1980s.

"The Recent economic war, which is accompanied by political and psychological operations, is one of the most complicated and difficult wars and is even harder than the Sacred Defense," Mousavi said during a conference at Khatam al-Anbia Air Defense Base.

## Rouhani felicitates Raisi on his new post, says govt. ready to cooperate with Judiciary

President Hassan Rouhani sent a message to Ebrahim Raisi on Saturday to offer him congratulations on his appointment as chief of the Judiciary by the Supreme Leader.

In the letter, Rouhani stressed that the government is ready to cooperate and interact with the Judiciary towards realization of the noble causes of the Islamic system and full implementation of the Constitution.

The full text of the message, posted on the presidential official website, is as follows:

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

Your Excellency Mr. Hojjatoleslam val-Moslemin Raisi,

Esteemed Head of the Judicial Branch,

Hello and peace be upon you,

I would like to express congratulations on your appointment as the Head of the Judicial Branch by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, which indicates his trust in your competent management in your previous responsibilities in that branch.

The judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the most important symbol of our Islamic System's resolve in defending people's rights and implementing justice and ensuring social security. Without a doubt, carrying out this important mission will be possible under independence of the judiciary, away from factional and partisan considerations, and indifference towards pressures from the

side of some media powers, in carrying out which the steps taken should be finalized.

In this critical point, a great part of the responsibility of strengthening the social capital and people's trust is on the shoulder of that esteemed branch, which by following the path of the founder of the judiciary Ayatollah Dr. Beheshti, and full implementation of the Late Imam Khomeini's rules and commands, especially his eight-point decree issued in 1982, and the guidelines of the Supreme Leader, we can witness more successful, dynamic Islamic and revolutionary values.

I hereby express the government's readiness to cooperate and interact with the judiciary in realization of the noble causes of

the Islamic System and full implementation of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and hope that with your presence at the head of the judiciary of the country, we witness the developments expected by the people for spreading social justice, protecting public and citizens' rights, fighting all aspects of corruption seriously, strengthening security, including investment security and safeguarding healthy economic activities in the country.

I also deem it necessary to acknowledge the services and attempts of the previous Head of the Judicial Branch, Ayatollah Amoli Larijani, and wish him more success in serving the people and the Islamic System.



# U.S. warns of ‘grave consequences’ if Turkey buys S-400s

The United States warned of “grave consequences” on March 9 if Turkey purchases the Russian S-400 missile defense system because it could affect the deal for F-35 fighter jets and the Patriot missile system.

Pentagon spokesman Charles Summers told reporters Turkey’s decision to accept the Russian defense system “would mean that they would not have access to the Patriots and the F-35s.”

“If Turkey takes the S400s there will be grave consequences in terms of our military relationship with them and with the Patriots and the F-35s,” Summers said.

He did not provide any additional consequences.

Earlier this week, Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti told a Senate committee he hopes Turkey would reconsider its decision to purchase the S-400 system.

Scaparrotti, who also serves as NATO’s top commander, pointed to several problems the Russian system poses, including lack of interoperability with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) systems and said the S-400 is “a problem to all of our aircraft, but specifically the F-35, I believe.”

After protracted efforts to purchase air defense systems from the U.S. with no suc-



cess, Ankara decided in 2017 to buy Russian S-400 air defense systems.

The move was criticized by the Pentagon, which warned that purchasing the S-400 would hurt Turkish-U.S. relations and Turkey’s role in NATO.

Washington has cautioned the S-400 system might covertly obtain critical information on the advanced fighter jets, including

their detection range, which could then be relayed to Russia.

But Turkish officials said Ankara would not go back on its agreement with Russia, even if it were to also buy the Patriot system.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stressed Ankara purchasing the S-400s from Russia is “not a choice but a necessity.”

Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu

lu said last week Ankara and Washington have begun negotiating the potential purchase of Patriot missile defense systems from the U.S.

The State Department approved in December a possible \$3.5 billion sale of Patriot systems to Turkey that includes advanced radar systems, control centers, launching systems and guided missiles.

Ankara is planning to purchase 100 F-35 fighter jets from the U.S. pending congressional approval, and its pilots are currently training on the weapons platform at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona.

Turkish firms also supply the F-35 program with key components, including airframe structures and assemblies, and the center fuselages.

On March 6, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said Ankara finalized a deal on purchasing the S-400 missile system from Russia, and that in the future “we may work with S-500s,” the next-generation Russian missile system.

Akar added starting this October, the S-400 systems will be installed in Turkey, adding that the Turkish Air Force is working on where to deploy the missiles.

(Source: Hurriyet Daily News)

## N. Korea may be preparing a missile or space launch: NPR

North Korea may be preparing for a missile or space launch, U.S. news outlet NPR has reported, based on satellite image analysis of a key facility near Pyongyang.

NPR said the images of Sanumdong, one of the facilities Pyongyang has used to produce inter-continental ballistic missiles and space rockets, were taken days before U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met in Hanoi for their high-stakes summit, which ended in failure. The photos by the firm DigitalGlobe show the presence of cars and trucks at the site on Feb. 22, said NPR - which has exclusive access to the imagery.

It added that rail cars and cranes can also be seen at a yard. “When you put all that together, that’s really what it looks like when the North Koreans are in the process of building a rocket,” Jeffrey Lewis, a researcher at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, was quoted as saying by NPR on Friday.

The Sanumdong analysis comes days after the specialized website 38 North and the Center for Strategic and International Studies said Pyongyang may have resumed operations at its long-range rocket launch site at Sohae, based on their study of satellite imagery from March 6.

The development is likely to further compound Washington’s frustration over the lack of progress in its bid to get the North to give up its atomic arsenal, especially after the Feb. 27-28 summit between Trump and Kim collapsed without so much as a joint statement – let alone an agreement on nuclear disarmament.

According to senior U.S. officials, in the week leading up to the Hanoi summit, the North Koreans had demanded the lifting of effectively all U.N. Security Council economic sanctions imposed on Pyongyang since March 2016.

In return, Pyongyang offered only to close part of the Yongbyon complex, a sprawling site covering multiple facilities. The North is also believed to have other uranium enrichment plants. But North Korean foreign minister Ri Yong Ho disputed the U.S. account, saying Pyongyang offered to dismantle all “nuclear production facilities in the Yongbyon area” in exchange for partial sanctions relief.

Trump said Friday that his relationship with Kim “remains good,” despite the setback in Hanoi.

U.S. officials have said Washington believes the “final, fully verified denuclearization” of North Korea is still possible by the end of Trump’s first term.



Kim released his first public message since the Hanoi summit on Saturday earlier this week, instructing propaganda officials to conduct “positive information” activities to spur scientific and technological development, according to a Saturday report by North Korean state media outlet KCNA.

(Source: AFP)

## French yellow vest protests hold 17th weekend of marches

Hundreds of “yellow vest” protesters began marches in Paris on Saturday, marking the 17th straight weekend of anti-government demonstrations despite attempts by French President Emmanuel Macron to quell discontent with a nationwide series of debates.

Protesters wearing the neon high-visibility vests that have come to symbolize the movement were joined by others donning pink tops, as child-care workers turned out against a reform of their unemployment subsidies.

Other gatherings were planned on Saturday in several French cities such as Bordeaux and Toulouse as well as smaller towns such as southerly Puy-en-Velay.

Some demonstrators staged a “flashmob” at Paris’ Charles de Gaulle airport, waving French flags and dancing in one of the terminals, television footage on BFM TV showed.

What started out last November as a backlash against Macron’s plan to hike fuel taxes — part of his bid to push a cleaner energy model — has morphed into a broader



movement decrying the government as out of touch with the hardships faced by some households and low-income workers.

Turnout has dwindled since nearly 300,000 people took part in road blockades and marches across France on Nov. 17, coming in at 46,600 last Saturday according to the

interior ministry.

But protesters have carried on nonetheless, with few signs of a halt in demonstrations any time soon. The latest turnout figures were not yet available. Macron, who dropped the fuel tax increase and budgeted an extra 10 billion euros (\$11.24 billion) to help the poorest workers,

has also sought to defuse the unrest with a series of town hall-like meetings across France.

Consultations with local representatives are due to draw to a close next weekend, coinciding with calls by some ‘yellow vest’ campaigners to up the pressure on the government throughout March. The movement has no single leader.

After protests descended into riots in December, recent demonstrations been largely peaceful.

Some 54 percent of French people backed or had sympathy with the ‘yellow vests’, an Ifop poll taken on March 7 and 8 for online news site Atlantico showed on Saturday. That was up from 50 percent in mid-February but down from a peak of 72 percent.

Macron’s popularity has also improved in recent weeks. An Ipsos poll released on March 6 showed his ratings improved by 8 percentage points since December of 2018, to a 28 percent approval level.

(Source: AP)

## Swiss court receives petition to protect Bouteflika from entourage

A lawyer acting on behalf of an unnamed Algerian citizen has filed a petition with a Swiss court requesting that Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in Switzerland for medical treatment, be placed under a trusteeship for his own protection.

The petition came as tens of thousands of people protested in Algeria against the 82-year-old ailing leader’s bid to secure a fifth term in the country’s April 18 elections.

It was unclear whether the court would admit the case, or whether the petition, received Friday, had any chance of garnering support.

Saskia Ditisheim, who is president of the Swiss division of Lawyers without Borders but did not file the petition in the organization’s name, said in the document that Bouteflika’s “fragile health” left him vulnerable to “exploitation” by those around him.

The TPAE court she sent the document to specializes in the protection of vulnerable adults and children.

“It is obvious that the Algerian president is today incapable of discernment, with a very precarious health condition and that all of his actions ... have not been carried out by him but by his political and familial entourage,” said the document.

It was therefore clear that the Algerian leader had not himself decided to submit his candidacy for a fifth term.

He could also not have himself issued a statement this week that warned protesters in Algeria that troublemakers may try to infiltrate the demonstrations and create “chaos,” according to the petition.

Under the Hague Convention, it would usually fall to Algerian legal authorities to determine if a citizen should



be placed under trusteeship, according to Nicolas Jeandin, a Swiss lawyer and law professor at the University of Geneva.

But if the Swiss court deems there is an urgent need to protect a vulnerable individual, it could choose to weigh in, he told AFP, stressing that “the question is if there is urgency.”

If so, in theory at least, “the Swiss judge should disregard the political backdrop ... and determine if this person needs assistance.”

Bouteflika, in power since 1999, has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013.

He has been in Switzerland for nearly two weeks receiving what his office has called routine medical checkups.

Bouteflika’s campaign manager Abdel-Ghani Zaalane

insisted Thursday that the president’s health raised “no worries.”

Ditisheim said her client had already requested that the University Hospitals of Geneva (HUG) release Bouteflika’s medical records to determine his actual condition, maintaining it was of public interest to Algerians.

While the medical records remain closed, the petition points to press reports indicating that Bouteflika’s condition was “very precarious” and “life-threatening,” and also questioned his mental capacities.

The petition called on the court to name one or several trustees to look out for Bouteflika’s wellbeing.

It also asked the court to lift the medical secrecy around his condition, and to authorize the medical staff at HUG to issue a certificate pertaining to his health condition and aptitude to govern.

The petition also demands that any statements made in Bouteflika’s name first receive trustee approval.

And it said the trustee or trustees should be authorized to take any necessary measures to protect the Algerian president’s interests.

An emergency request to place someone under trusteeship can often be ruled on in a matter of days.

But in this case, the judge might want to mull it over a bit longer and would also likely request a medical expertise before ruling on the matter, Jeandin said.

Ditisheim meanwhile acknowledged the sensitivity of the case and said the court might try to stall until Bouteflika is flown back to Algeria.

(Source: AFP)

## Syrian forces discover U.S., Israeli-made munitions in militant redoubts

Syrian government forces have carried out a major clean-up operation in the country’s southwestern province of Rif Dimashq, discovering a considerable amount of the United States-built and Israeli-made munitions from terrorist hideouts.

An unnamed field commander told Syria’s official news agency SANA that Syrian soldiers launched the operation in the town of Yalda, which lies on the southern outskirts of the capital Damascus, on Saturday to clear the area of hidden explosive devices and ordnance left behind by the militants.

The commander added that the munitions included American BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles, Israeli-made M72 LAW anti-tank weapons, mortar launchers, various-caliber mortars, hand grenades as well as rocket-propelled grenades.

Separately, Syrian army units foiled an attack by Takfiri terrorists on a military post in the country’s west-central province of Hama.

A Syrian military source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Syrian troops engaged in a heavy exchange of gunfire with the extremists in al-Suqaylabiyah city, killing and injuring a number of them in the process.

Initial reports indicate that a number of Syrian soldiers lost their lives or sustained gunshot wounds during the clash.

■ **‘Grave concerns’ over health of 65,000 refugees in al-Hol camp**

Meanwhile, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday that international humanitarian agencies had “grave concerns over the fragile health of residents” of al-Hol camp in Syria’s northeastern province of Hasakah.

Dujarric said that more than 3,000 people, mostly women and children, had reached the camp from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh)-held areas in the eastern province of Dayr al-Zawr the previous night, bringing the total population of al-Hol camp to more than 65,000.

“Urgent funding is needed to ramp up the response, especially in the areas of shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, health and protection services,” the UN spokesman said.

“There are grave concerns over the fragile health of the camp’s residents, with nearly 100 people having died since early last December en route to the site (or) shortly after arrival or referral,” he pointed out.

Dujarric further noted that two-thirds of the people who had died were children under the age of five, with hypothermia, pneumonia, dehydration and complications from malnutrition being the main causes of death.

“At least 243 unaccompanied and separated children have been identified in the camp, of whom 41 have been reunited with their families,” he said.

“The UN and aid agencies are scaling up their efforts at the camp, providing round-the-clock emergency health and protection assistance,” Dujarric said. “All of the people arriving at the camp are receiving food, water, shelter, warm clothes or blankets.”

Syria has been gripped by foreign-backed militancy since March 2011. The Syrian government says the Israeli regime and its Western and regional allies are aiding Takfiri terrorist groups wreaking havoc in the country.

(Source: Press TV)

## China’s Belt and Road plan could be good for Italy: Italian PM

China’s “Belt and Road” infrastructure plan could be good news for Italy, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said on Friday, confirming that he might sign an accord with Chinese President Xi Jinping later this month.

Xi is due to travel to Italy from March 22-24 and Conte said Rome and Beijing were looking to agree to a framework deal during the state visit, despite reports that the United States is concerned at the prospect of a key ally joining the venture.

“With all the necessary precautions, Italy’s accession to a new silk route represents an opportunity for our country,” Conte told a foreign policy seminar in the northern city of Genoa.

“It won’t mean that the next day we will be forced to do anything. It will allow us to enter into this project and have a dialogue,” he added.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), championed by Xi, aims to link China by sea and land with southeast and central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa, through an infrastructure network on the lines of the old Silk Road.

Aside from boosting trade and investment, Xi aims to advance exchanges in areas such as science, technology and culture.

Conte said he planned to attend a BRI summit in China in April and promised to bring European Union trade standards to the ambitious project.

“This is a strategic choice for the country .. and such choices need coordinating with traditional partners. Dialogue with the United States, for example, is constant,” he said, dismissing suggestions Washington could penalize Italy.

The United States has recently expressed particular concern over two of China’s biggest telecom network equipment companies, Huawei Technologies Cos Ltd and ZTE Corp, saying they work at the behest of the Chinese government and that their equipment could be used to spy on the West.

Both companies have denied that their products are used to spy. Conte said he agreed such concerns needed to be taken seriously and that Rome had to be cautious, but he did not signal he was preparing to impose fresh curbs on the firms.

“Huawei and ZTE have been operating for years in Italy in an advantageous fashion,” he said.

A number of European Union states have signed BRIMOU with China, including Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Greece, Malta, Poland and Portugal. If Italy signs, it would be the first Group of Seven major industrialized nation to do so.

The Financial Times reported on Wednesday that the United States was irritated by the prospect of Italy joining the BRI, and had warned the project could significantly damage Rome’s international image.

Italy fell into recession at the end of 2018 for the third time in a decade and the government is eager to find ways to boost the economy and revive the stalled construction sector.

(Source: Reuters)



STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	163007.4
IFX	2050.51

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,000 rials
EUR	47,191 rials
GBP	54,667 rials
AED	11,437 rials

Source: cbi.ir

COMMODITIES

Brent	\$65.74/b
WTI	\$56.07/b
OPEC Basket	\$65.57/b
Gold	\$1,299.55/oz
Silver	\$15.40/oz
Platinum	\$821.80/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

VP inaugurates 2 major industrial projects

➔ Jhangiri also inaugurated a slaughterhouse in Eyvanekey Industrial Estate in Garmsar County in a ceremony attended by Agriculture Minister Mahmoud Hojjati.

The director general of Veterinary Department of Semnan Province put the fixed investment for implementation of the



project at 220 billion rials (about \$5.2 million) and said some 50 billion rials (about \$1.1 million) has been paid for purchasing domestically-made machinery and €10.2 million has been paid for the purchase of foreign machinery.

Mohammad Saedi also said that 50 billion rials (about \$1.1 million) of required investment for the project has been secured through the plan of job creation in rural areas and 30 billion rials (about \$714,285) of it has been supplied via facilities of production flourishing plan.

ECB in panic mode? Experts warn it'll take more than a central bank to help Europe recover

New monetary stimulus from the European Central Bank (ECB) will do "little" to boost the region's sluggish economy and tackle its biggest risks, analysts told CNBC.

"(The ECB's) announcements have some flavor of panic as the ECB's base case scenario still foresees a gradual recovery and the 2020 and 2021 forecasts were hardly revised downwards," Carsten Brzeski, chief economist at ING Germany, said in a note Thursday.

The Frankfurt-based institution surprised markets with a renewed dovish tone. ECB President Mario Draghi said that interest rates would remain at record lows at least until December. Growth forecasts for the euro zone were slashed for this year and new loans to euro zone banks were announced.

"The measures as such are not such a big surprise but the timing of the announcement is," Brzeski added.

"(The announcements) are also a bit of a gamble as they will do very little to tackle the biggest risks for the euro zone economy, which according to the ECB stem from external sources."

Draghi even acknowledged this fact in a press conference following the ECB's formal rate decision on Thursday. "We are aware that our decisions (new stimulus) certainly increase the resilience of the euro zone economy, but actually can they address these factors that are weighing on the euro zone economy in the rest of the world? They cannot," Draghi told reporters, adding that protectionism and geopolitics were among those outside risks.

The euro zone economy saw its lowest pace of growth in four years during the final three months of 2018, data showed in January. More recently, manufacturing data have shown a slowdown in activity. This comes amid concerns over global growth, tariffs between the U.S and China, and weakness in emerging markets.

"With few domestic catalysts for a turnaround, it may take a rebound in demand from the emerging world to improve prospects for the (euro zone) region," Tilmann Galler, a global market strategist at J.P. Morgan Asset Management, said in a note Tuesday.

The ECB slashed its growth forecast for 2019 to 1.1 percent from an earlier forecast of 1.7 percent made in December. The bank also lowered its inflation forecasts for 2019. Annual inflation is set to hit 1.2 percent this year, when December forecasts had pointed to a headline inflation target of 1.6 percent. The ECB's inflation target is "close but below 2 percent."

"I wonder if the ECB will ever increase rates in this economic cycle," Christoph Schon, executive director at Axioma, told CNBC Friday, given the prolonged moribund state of the economy.

(Source: CNBC)

Railway fleet to receive 77 passenger wagons

**ECONOMY** **TEHRAN** – Head of d e s k Raja Rail Transportation Company said 77 new passenger wagons are going to be added to the country's railway transportation fleet before the Persian New Year (Nowrouz) holiday (which starts on March 21).

"Despite financial issues, in the last 27 months, over 50 new passenger cars have been purchased and added to the country's railway fleet," ILNA quoted Mohammad Rajabi as saying.

He also mentioned the renovation of more than 67 worn wagons, saying «In addition to renovating this number of wagons, we have managed to purchase 27 second-hand passenger cars that are in excellent condition.»

"A total of 77 new wagons have been added to the country's passenger railway transportation fleet," Rajabi added.

Raja is an arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways which is in charge of handling passenger transportation.

According to Saeed Mohammadzadeh,

Iran imports \$14b of basic goods in 11 months

**ECONOMY** **TEHRAN** – Iran imported \$14 billion worth of basic goods during the first 11 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2018 – February 19, 2019), IRIB reported quoting the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

"Regarding the basic goods, the country is well supplied and even the imports of some commodities like corn and meat have increased compared to last year," Mehdi Mirashrafi said.

The official who was visiting the country's southeastern borders with Iraq, emphasized the importance of the trade with the neighboring countries, saying "In addition to using water borders and organizing them, Iran has a special focus on land borders including those with Iraq."

The official further pointed to the country's exports and noted that China and Iraq have been Iran's top export destinations in the mentioned time span with \$8.3 billion and \$8.2 billion worth of exports, respectively.

Referring to negotiations with Iraq and Kurdistan region's customs officials for creating a common gateway with the Arab nation,



Mirashrafi said: "We are trying to increase coordination in border management and establish a common gateway for trade with Iraq, which can reduce the costs of exports and transit significantly."

Earlier in December 2018, The Iranian Industry Minister Reza Rahmani announced that since the beginning of the present Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2018) the government has paid \$14 billion of foreign currency at official exchange rate to import basic goods.

According to the country's Finance and Economic Affairs Minister Farhad Dejpasand, Iran's non-oil trade with other countries registered a \$1.5-billion positive balance in the first eleven months of the current Iranian calendar year.

Iran can find ways to sell oil in defiance of U.S. sanctions

An official predicted that the U.S. may extend a waiver for at least four of the eight nations that still import oil from Iran, stressing that Tehran should nonetheless look for various methods to keep selling crude.

In an interview with Tasnim, secretary of the Iranian Union of Oil Products Exporters, Hamid Hosseini, said the U.S. sanction waivers for Iranian oil importers will be likely extended.

"Given the current situation in Venezuela and the relatively increasing trend of oil prices in the world, it is unlikely that the U.S. will not extend waivers for the eight countries purchasing Iranian oil," he said, adding that even if the sanction waivers are not extended, China and India do not seem to abide by the U.S. sanctions against Iran.

Raising the possibility that the U.S. sanction waivers for at least four of the eight Iranian oil customers may be extended, Hosseini said even if the waivers do not remain in place, Iran will still be able to export oil by using methods that are different from the sale systems under normal circumstances.



He further pointed to the methods that Venezuela has adopted to sell its crude in the free market under the foreign sanctions, saying Iran, too, should find ways to keep exporting crude and oil products even if the sanction waivers are terminated.

In an interview with Tasnim in February, Secretary of

Germany's two shrinking banks may be getting closer to a merger

A merger of Deutsche Bank AG and Commerzbank AG is shaping up as the most likely endgame as Germany's largest listed lenders are running out of time to show they can grow as standalone companies.

The banks are intensifying informal talks as their turnaround efforts sputter, according to a person familiar with the matter. While there's no

formal mandate to pursue a merger and other options are still being considered, Deutsche Bank Chief Executive Officer Christian Sewing has given up his resistance to doing a deal this year, according to the person, who asked not to be identified in disclosing internal deliberations.

Less than a year after taking over, Sewing is still struggling to reverse a long slide in revenue

amid a slowdown in the economy that's delaying a return to more normal interest rates. The Finance Ministry favors a merger of both lenders before the situation gets worse to support the small and mid-sized companies that are the backbone of the export economy, people familiar with the matter have said.

Deutsche Bank in February reaffirmed its

2019 profitability target but also made clear that it would need to implement tougher measures if markets don't play along and revenue continues to decline. January was a terrible month for the trading business though February has seen improving conditions, several people familiar with the matter said.

(Source: Bloomberg)

China's 21% plunge in exports shows weakening global economy

China's huge export industry has suffered its worst month in three years, hurt by the trade war with the United States and a slowing global economy.

Chinese exports plunged 21 percent in February from a year earlier, according to Chinese government data released Friday. It was the weakest monthly performance since February 2016 and far worse than economists had predicted.

The tariffs imposed last year by the U.S. government on about \$250 billion of Chinese products are taking a toll. The value of goods shipped to the United States fell much more sharply than for other major markets, according to the data.

"U.S. tariffs have become a more meaningful drag on exports," Julian Evans-Pritchard, a China economist at research firm Capital Economics, said in a note to clients.

But the trade war, which China and the United States are trying to resolve through negotiations, is only part of the problem. The slump in Chinese exports provides "further evidence that global demand is cooling," according to Evans-Pritchard.

If the two governments "finalize a trade deal soon, the outlook for exports remains gloomy," he said.

February's fall in exports followed an unexpected rebound in January, which analysts put down to companies rushing through orders ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday in early February. But even with these distortions taken into account, the performance of exports across the two months was still weak.

The tough situation is likely to continue in the coming months as demand softens in major markets such as Europe.

The International Monetary Fund expects global economic growth to decline this year. And the European Central Bank



alarmed investors on Thursday by warning of "a sizeable reduction in the pace of economic expansion" that's prompting it to keep interest rates at record lows for the foreseeable future and to announce new cheap loans for banks to try to prop up growth.

China's benchmark stock index, the Shanghai Composite (SHCOMP), plunged 4.4 percent on Friday. Chinese stocks, which have surged in recent weeks, came under pressure from the disappointing export data, broker downgrades and the gloomy ECB comments.

Chinese exports are also expected to suffer from companies moving their supply chains out of China to avoid the U.S. tariffs.

"The ongoing trade tensions between the United States and China have already prompted some corporates to hedge against such risks," Raymond Yeung, an economist at investment bank ANZ, wrote in a client note.

That's despite a recent easing in trade tensions. U.S. President



the head of Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (known as RAI), development of Iranian railways requires more than 32,000 wagons and locomotives in the next four years when the railway infrastructures are developed in the country.

"The national network fleet needs over 30,000 cargo wagons, 2,000 passenger wagons and 650 locomotives in the next

four years." The official says.

Earlier in April 2018, Mir-Hassan Mousavi, the deputy managing director at RAI, said 90 passenger wagons will be added to the Iranian railway fleet in the current Iranian calendar year.

At the time the official put the current number of passenger wagons at 1,308 with the average life of 25 years.

Tajikistan eyeing further trade with Iran

Tajikistan's Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda, in a meeting with Iran's outgoing Ambassador to Tajikistan Hojatollah Faqani, said that Dushanbe is determined to increase economic and commercial relations with Tehran, calling for increase in volume of trade between the two countries.

"Our leadership emphasizes the expansion of economic, commercial and investment cooperation with Iran. We demand an increase in the volume of trade exchanges, especially the strengthening of investments and presence of Iran in the agricultural, energy, industry and tourism sectors of Tajikistan," Rasulzoda said, during a farewell visit by Iranian ambassador on Thursday.

Saying that the capacities of the two countries are far beyond their current trade figures, the Tajik Prime Minister reiterated, "It is necessary to take various measures, especially in the Joint Economic Committee of the two countries, as well as setting up trade fairs and conferences, strengthening the private sector and inter-provincial and inter-city cooperation to realize these capacities."



Rasulzoda also hailed Iran for its investment in Tajikistan's major infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Sangtudeh- 2 power plant, the Esteqlal Tunnel, and Rogun Dam and power plant, and called for the development of such joint cooperation.

The Iranian diplomat, for his part pointed to Iran and Tajikistan's commonalities and said that in recent years, certain third parties have been trying to exploit and sow discord between the two countries.

But they have fortunately failed thanks to determination of the high-ranking authorities and presidents of the two nations. (Source: Fars News Agency)





# Oil optimists stay the course even as demand headwinds loom

Hedge funds keep betting on an oil rally, even with prices stuck in neutral. Investors pushed bullish wagers on West Texas Intermediate crude prices to their highest in a month and cut short-selling bets to the lowest since October, apparently convinced that dwindling global supplies will be more than enough to withstand a weaker economy.

Futures in New York ended the week up by a mere 0.5 percent, with disappointing reports on U.S. jobs, Chinese exports and global economic growth clouding the outlook for energy demand. But money managers appear to be focusing on the impact of OPEC output cuts, a pipeline explosion in Nigeria and U.S. sanctions on Iran and Venezuela.

"There probably is some expectation that something is going to force production to go lower somewhere," said Leo Mariani, a Keybank Capital Markets Inc. analyst. That's "fired up a little optimism in crude -- but I think we need to see some more follow-through."

Net-long WTI positions -- the difference between bullish and bearish bets -- climbed by 15 percent to 151,560 options and futures contracts for the week ended March 5, according to U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission data released Friday. It was the first time since late December that investors had access to up-to-date positioning data. The figures had been unavailable during the



U.S. government shutdown and then delayed for weeks after it ended. Long-only bets on an increase grew by 5 percent, the most since July. Wagers on a decline were cut by 13 percent.

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Long-only bets on an increase grew by 5 percent, the most since July. Wagers on a decline were cut by 13 percent.

The picture for Brent crude, the global benchmark, was more muddled, with money managers edging back on both bullish and bearish positions. Long-only wagers fell by 1.5 percent while short-selling bets were cut by 3.2 percent, the ICE Futures Europe exchange said.

Oil prices surged about 25 percent through mid-February, but they've largely moved sideways since then. The markets may not find a direction until April, as it becomes clear whether the U.S. plans to revoke waivers allowing Iranian exports to be sold, Mariani said. OPEC is also due to meet that month to determine whether to extend its production curbs.

Oil's future is also "highly dependent" on how the ongoing U.S.-China trade war plays out, added Gene McGillian, vice president of market research at Tradition Energy.

"Until we get a clear indication of how demand growth will play out, we won't see more conviction on things going higher," McGillian said. "We're all watching for the new shoe to drop here."

(Source: Bloomberg)

## World's largest sovereign wealth fund to scrap oil and gas stocks

Norway's trillion-dollar sovereign wealth fund plans to dump oil and gas companies from its benchmark index, the finance ministry announced on Friday.

The move, initiated by Norges Bank which manages the fund, is designed to make the Norwegian government's wealth less exposed to a lasting drop in oil prices.

"The Government is proposing to exclude companies classified as exploration and production companies within the energy sector from the Government Pension Fund Global to reduce the aggregate oil price risk in the Norwegian economy," the finance ministry said in a statement published on its website.

The exclusion will affect companies that explore and produce oil and will not impact integrated oil and gas companies such as BP and Shell. The Norwegian government also said that the companies to be excluded are those belonging to FTSE Russell's Index sub sector called exploration and production. According to the government, the value of 134 stocks to be excluded from fund amounted to NOK 70 billion (\$7.9 billion), Reuters reported.

Shortly after the announcement, energy stocks worldwide extended losses on Friday morning.

International benchmark Brent crude traded at around \$65.18 on Friday, down around 1.7 percent, while U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) stood at around \$55.78, more than 1.6 percent lower.

Energy stocks are notoriously volatile. Brent crude collapsed from a near four-year high of \$86.29 in early October down to \$50.47 in late December -- marking a fall of more than 40 percent in less than three months.



Norway's government said on Friday that the fund would still be allowed to invest in oil and gas firms so long as they were committed to activities concerning renewable energy.

Oil and gas stocks represented 5.9 percent of equity investments by the end of 2018, Reuters reported, citing fund data. That's the equivalent to approximately \$37 billion.

Norway has faced criticism over its attempts to balance environmentally-focused policies and being one of the world's largest petroleum producers.

It has become one of the world's leading countries for electric vehicles while putting pressure on emerging market economies, such as Brazil and Indonesia, to better protect their rainforests.

After a strong start to 2019 for stocks, the Norges Bank website said late last month that the fund is currently valued at \$1.03 trillion.

At the end of 2018, the fund's biggest equity holdings were in Microsoft (\$7.5 billion), Apple (\$7.3 billion), Alphabet (\$6.7 billion), Amazon (\$6.4 billion), Nestle (\$6.3 billion) and Royal Dutch Shell (\$6 billion).

(Source: CNBC)

## Trump again seeks deep cuts in renewable energy funding

The Trump administration is again seeking severe cuts to the U.S. Energy Department division charged with renewable energy and energy efficiency research, according to a department official familiar with the plan.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy would see its \$2.3 billion budget slashed by about 70 percent, to \$700 million, under President Donald Trump's fiscal 2020 budget request, which is set to be released on Monday.

The request is unlikely to be granted by Congress, especially with Democrats in charge of the House, but the figure represents an opening bargaining position for negotiations by the White House.

The Energy Department declined to comment and the White House Office of Management and Budget didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

The Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, which provides hundreds of millions of dollars a year in grants and other financial assistance for clean energy, has financed research into technologies ranging from electric vehicles to energy projects powered by ocean waves. It has been credited with financing research to help make the cost of wind power competitive with coal, and cutting the costs of LED lighting.

The Trump administration has tried to gut the program before, only to be rebuffed by Congress. Last year, the White House proposed cutting the agency's funding by nearly two-thirds, but Congress instead provided \$2.3 billion for the agency, more than three times the White House's request.

In the past, Trump administration officials have defended the cuts, arguing they are justified by the falling costs of renewables



and other emerging energy technologies.

In testimony before a House panel Thursday, Daniel Simmons, the Energy Department assistant secretary who heads the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, said he couldn't talk about the budget proposal. But he noted the division had recently completed funding announcements for research into hydrogen and batteries for heavy-duty trucks among other technologies.

Michigan Republican Representative Fred Upton told him at the hearing that lawmakers expects the office "to carry out the law as Congress intended and utilize the resources Congress provides."

Meanwhile, conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation have called for the office to be eliminated entirely, saying energy innovation is best left up to the private sector.

The budget for energy efficiency and renewable energy "is completely out control and even with the reduction it would still be one of the largest budgets in the Energy line," said Tom Pyle, who led Trump's Energy Department transition team and serves as president of the American Energy Alliance, a free-market advocacy group.

(Source: Bloomberg)

## Oil prices on the rise, but tighter market fundamentals stoke bullish sentiment

Almost two months into the New Year and oil prices have staged a remarkable turnaround, recovering nearly half of their losses from the last quarter of 2018, when prices dropped by almost 35 percent. Brent crude, the international oil benchmark, is up by around 21 percent so far in 2019 at \$65.1/bbl, having posted in January its best monthly return in almost three years. Its light U.S. crude counterpart, West Texas Intermediate (WTI), has gained almost 23 percent year-to-date to top \$55/bbl.

Prices have been riding a crest of bullish sentiment since late December, centered largely but not exclusively on the expressed commitment of OPEC and its Vienna agreement partners to drain excess supplies from the market.

Geopolitical risk factors have also come into play on the supply side. The imposition of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela in January, added to the impending expiry of the 180-day U.S. sanctions waivers on Iran in May and crude rationing in Canada due to pipeline bottlenecks, has helped feed into the narrative of tightening crude markets, especially in heavy sour crude.

On the oil demand side, the outlook over the next six to twelve months is also supportive. The International Energy Agency (IEA) expects global oil demand in 2019 to increase by 1.4 mb/d to 100.6 mb/d. This compares with 2018's increase of 1.3 mb/d. In its forecast, the IEA cites the start-up of petrochemical projects in the U.S. and China and the lower oil prices of 4Q18 as being positive for oil demand growth. Colder temperatures in the northern hemisphere winter (heating oil) are also bound to be supportive, at least in 1Q19.

The relatively healthy oil demand out-

look comes despite projections of weaker global economic growth this year by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Fund recently lowered its estimate of global growth for 2019 by 0.2 percent to 3.5 percent on softer Eurozone and China output, tighter monetary conditions and potentially deteriorating China-U.S. trade relations. On the latter, oil markets appear to be currently adopting a less alarmist attitude, however, although given the ebb and flow of these trade discussions, tensions could come to the fore at any time.

The change in the outlook is especially evident in the futures market, where over the last two months, the Brent futures curve has flipped from a contango structure, in which near-term (or spot) prices for delivery of crude oil are lower than prices for delivery further out, to the opposite, backward-dated structure. Here, prices for immediate delivery (M1) are higher than prices for delivery in twelve months (M12), for example, a sign that markets are getting tighter.

Hedge funds and speculators are also moving back into oil. Money managers' net positioning on Brent, the difference between bets that Brent will rise (longs) and bets that the oil price will fall (shorts), have increased every week in 2019 so far to 266,057 futures and options as of 12 February. There are almost six times as many long contracts as there are shorts, the most the market has been bullish since last October.

This current situation is in marked contrast to the situation in the second half of 2018, when oil supplies were rising at least twice as fast as oil demand, leading to a build-up of global oil stocks. Amid relentless U.S. shale gains, oil producers had ramped up output to compensate for Venezuelan and Iranian

supply losses, only to be caught off guard when the Trump administration, fearful of higher oil prices ahead of the U.S. mid-terms, extended sanctions waivers to Iran's major crude importers, thereby mitigating the more severe Iranian supply losses that many had been anticipating.

■ **OPEC+ compliance off to a slow start**

Total OPEC+ production in January came in at 44.75 mb/d, implying that the group had achieved only 66 percent of its target of reducing production by 1.2 mb/d over the first half of 2019. However, this masks considerable overachievement so early into the agreement period on the part of large oil producers such as OPEC Saudi Arabia (130 percent) and Kuwait (117 percent) and non-OPEC Kazakhstan (135 percent) and Mexico (132 percent). Russia (18 percent) and Iraq (-11 percent) stand out among the major producers as having made the least progress, with the latter actually increasing output to above its October baseline reference level.

Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that, like the 2016 Vienna agreement, the current OPEC+ deal will achieve its objective in the next few months. Saudi Arabia, in particular, appears determined to restore prices to what it probably views as the most appropriate equilibrium range in the age of US shale, around \$65-75/bbl. This level is closer to the kingdom's fiscal breakeven oil price level and not too high to crimp oil demand. Saudi's Al-Falih indicated that the country is prepared to go above and beyond the level which is mandated by the OPEC+ production cut and reduce output further from January's 10.2 mb/d to 9.8 mb/d by March, more than 500 kb/d below its target quota. Moreover, conscious of the outsized influence that US data has on oil market

perceptions, the kingdom began reeling in exports of its crude to the US market, where every barrel that isn't refined only adds to the country's closely-watched crude stock levels. The question is will that be enough to bring the market to balance and reverse global crude stock builds amid burgeoning U.S. shale production?

■ **Continued U.S. and non-OPEC supply gains in 2019**

U.S. crude production is projected to rise in 2019 by up to 1.5 mb/d to 12.4 mb/d, having posted an incredible increase of 1.6 mb/d (19 percent y/y) in 2018 to reach 10.9 mb/d, according to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA).

Growth of 1.5 mb/d in U.S. crude output in 2019 would, therefore, alone outpace the 1.2 mb/d of cuts that OPEC+ is orchestrating. And while the IEA is not so aggressive in its estimate of U.S. crude production growth in 2019, it places non-OPEC supply growth at around 1.3 mb/d in 2019-still higher than the OPEC+ cuts. In light of this, the IEA has revised down the 'call on OPEC', the volume of OPEC crude needed to meet demand, to 30.65 mb/d in 2019. Assuming OPEC achieves 100 percent compliance by the end of 1Q19 and maintains that level through to the end of 2019, we estimate that output from the producers' group will be around 100 kb/d higher than the 'call' at 30.75 mb/d. Importantly, this assumes no further declines in Venezuelan and Iranian production, which is highly unlikely in our view given the structural declines and U.S. sanctions in the former and the high probability that U.S. sanctions waivers will not be extended for the latter. Crude stock increases could therefore be limited to an average of 0.1 mb/d in 2019.

(Source: hellenicshippingnews.com)

## Saudi Arabia's Feb. crude oil output 10.1m bpd, March to go lower: official

Saudi Arabia produced 10.1 million bpd of crude oil in February, well below its quota under an OPEC/non-OPEC supply accord of 10.31 million bpd, an official in the kingdom told S&P Global Platts on Friday.

"March will be lower," the official added.

Saudi energy minister Khalid al-Falih said last month that March production would fall to 9.8 million bpd, with exports at 6.9 million bpd.

OPEC is set to reveal its members' February production levels in its monthly oil market report on Thursday. In last month's report, Saudi Arabia, OPEC's largest producer and the world's largest crude exporter, self-reported crude production of 10.24 million bpd for January.

Saudi Arabia has said it plans to lead the 24-country OPEC/non-OPEC coalition by example in its 1.2 million bpd production cut agreement, as analysts say it seeks higher oil prices to help fund domestic government spending. The cuts are scheduled to run through June.

The official told Platts that the kingdom supplied 10.01 million bpd to market in February, indicating that Saudi crude stocks built in the month. The supply to market figure includes exports, domestic refinery runs and domestic crude burn for power generation.

A key OPEC/non-OPEC monitoring committee chaired by Saudi Arabia and Russia will meet March 18 in Baku, Azerbaijan, while the next full OPEC meeting will be April 17 in Vienna, with Russia and the nine other non-OPEC partners joining talks a day later.

(Source: Platts)

## Petrobras plans to cut \$8.1b in operational costs through 2023

Brazil's state-controlled oil company Petrobrás Brasileiro SA, or Petrobras, announced plans to cut \$8.1 billion from its operational costs in the period from 2019 through 2023, according to a securities filing released on Friday.

Petrobras said it intends to reach that economy on costs mainly with reductions in expenses with employees -- it will launch a voluntary lay-off plan soon -- and with lower expenditures in advertisement and office spaces.

The company said the proposed cuts on operational costs will reduce that allocation in its 2019-2023 business plan, which originally estimated those costs at \$122.6 billion for the 5-year plan.

It also said it plans to sell some mature oil fields in Brazil, a small addition to its divestment program.

(Source: Reuters)

## China's Feb. crude oil imports rise 21.6 percent on year to 10.27 mil bpd

China's crude oil imports in February climbed 21.6 percent year on year to 10.27 million bpd, preliminary data from the General Administration of Customs showed Friday.

This was the fourth time China's monthly crude imports breached 10 million bpd, marking an increase of 2 percent from 10.07 million bpd in January.

GAC releases data in metric tons, which S&P Global Platts converts to barrels using a 7.33 conversion factor.

The country's crude imports in February totaled 39.23 million mt, compared to 42.6 million mt in January, the preliminary GAC data showed.

February fuel oil imports were 1.22 million mt, up 11.7 percent on year.

Meanwhile, China's oil product exports rose 9.2 percent year on year to 3.81 million mt in February, GAC data showed. On a daily basis, the volume went up 2.2 percent from 130,000 mt/day in January.

As a result, net oil product exports grew 67 percent on year to 1.46 million mt in February, the data further revealed.

(Source: Platts)

## Canada makes a tiny dent in its oil dependence on America

Canada's oil producers made a small dent in their near-total dependence on the U.S. market after a surge of shipments flowed to China and the U.K. last year.

The holder of the world's third-largest crude reserves sent 3.43 million barrels a day, or 96.4 percent of its oil exports, to its southern neighbor, the smallest percentage in data stretching back to 1988, according to Statistics Canada. Shipments to China almost doubled to a still-minuscule 20,000 barrels a day and crude bound for the U.K. nearly tripled to 31,500 barrels a day.

Exports to Europe rose after production ramped up from Exxon Mobil Corp.'s new Hebron platform off the Newfoundland coast and tankers left the Vancouver area for China in the second half of the year. Canadian oil companies and Alberta's government have pushed to ship more crude to Asia and markets other than the U.S., arguing that the country would get a better price for its crude with more customers.

Canadian crude prices plunged last year relative to world benchmarks amid a glut caused by too few pipelines, a situation that grew so dire that Alberta's government imposed mandatory production curtailments.

The surge in exports happened even as the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, a key export project to the Pacific coast, faced new delays after a court ruling forced the federal government to reopen the regulatory process, pushing back the project by at least a year.

"You are going to need some more pipeline capacity to the water" to make further gains in breaking Canada's dependence on the U.S., Sandy Fielden, director of oil and products research at Morningstar, said by phone from Austin, Texas.

(Source: Bloomberg)



## NEWS IN BRIEF

India's  
Pakistan envoy  
returns to  
Islamabad

**INTERNATIONAL** **TEHRAN** — In a move that marks the de-escalation of political and diplomatic tensions between India and Pakistan, New Delhi's envoy to Islamabad joined back office on Wednesday.

India's High Commissioner to Pakistan Ajay Bisaria, who was called back to New Delhi following escalation of tensions between the two warring neighbors weeks ago, is back in Islamabad. Relations between the two neighboring countries touched a new low last month following an attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir, in which 44 members of India's paramilitary police were killed.

Following the attack, both countries called back their envoys, apparently for 'consultations'.

The tensions lessened after Pakistan released an Indian pilot who was captured during the air raids, after which Pakistani premier offered peace talks with India.

Experts say the situation remains tense as border skirmishes continue, but a major military confrontation has been averted for now, which has allowed India's envoy to return to Islamabad.

India signs  
deal to lease  
Russian  
submarine

**INTERNATIONAL** **TEHRAN** — Taking their defense partnership to the next level, India has inked a \$3 billion agreement to lease a third Russian nuclear-powered submarine for 10 years.

The ambitious deal will give Indian navy a much-needed boost in the Indian Ocean against hostile neighbors, according to media reports.

The deal — which took months to negotiate — comes amidst simmering tensions between India and Pakistan and China's growing influence in the region, said reports.

A report in AFP said the submarine would be delivered to India by 2025, even though India's defense ministry has not confirmed the deal.

It will be the third Russian nuclear attack submarine to be leased to the Indian Navy, said a report in Defense News portal.

The INS Chakra III will not be equipped with long-range nuclear missiles because of international treaties. Its armaments include conventional land-attack and anti-ship missiles and torpedoes, the report said.

Indian Navy already operates one Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine, INS Chakra, that was leased for a period of 10 years at around \$1 billion in 2012, and its lease is likely to be extended for three more years.

Pakistan to  
comply on 15  
FATF  
conditions

**INTERNATIONAL** **TEHRAN** — To avoid falling into the blacklist of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Pakistan is required to show its compliance on 15 major conditions of the financial watchdog till May 2019.

In addition to these 15 major demands, the FATF in its last plenary meeting held in Paris also included three more steps for review in upcoming June meeting in Colombo.

The steps include revising and updating Pakistan's national risk assessment on terror financing, improving FBR's customs report on cash couriers to curb currency smuggling and placing inter agency cooperation mechanism among law enforcing agencies at federal and provincial levels.

Meanwhile, according to a report in Dawn, Pakistani government has decided to upgrade a group of banned militant organizations to 'high risk' and start monitoring and re-examining their activities to comply with the requirement of FATF.

All these entities have now been described as high-risk entities and would be subject to greater scrutiny by all agencies and institutions of the state, starting from their registration to operations and from their fund collection to bank accounts and issuance of suspicious transactions, information sharing and so on, the report noted.

U.S. asks its  
citizens  
not to visit  
Kashmir

**INTERNATIONAL** **TEHRAN** — Following escalation of tensions in the region, the U.S. government has issued a travel advisory for its nationals, asking them not to visit "most of Jammu and Kashmir".

The U.S. government on Friday updated its Level 2 travel alert for India and asked U.S. citizens not to visit "most of Jammu and Kashmir" due to "terrorism and civil unrest".

It also advised American travelers to not venture within 10 km of the border with Pakistan "due to the potential for armed conflict". A Level 1 alert means travelers should exercise normal precautions. A Level 2 alert asks visitors to exercise caution, while a Level 3 alert means "reconsider travel", and Level 4 is "do not travel".

The advisory says to "exercise caution" while visiting India and warned that terrorists "may attack with little or no warning, targeting tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, and government facilities".

On February 13, the U.S. government had issued a Level 3 alert for Pakistan, asking citizens to "reconsider travel" to the country. It asked its citizens not to travel to Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

In recent weeks, tensions between India and Pakistan have heightened, almost bringing two nuclear-armed neighbors to the brink of war. Even though the U.S. government is involved in war everywhere, it prioritizes the security of its own citizens.

‘Pakistani won’t allow its soil to be used  
for terrorist activities’

**INTERNATIONAL** **TEHRAN** — In the last few weeks, since the saber-rattling between the two South Asian nuclear giants took them to the brink of a full-fledged war, the role of Pakistani premier in de-escalating tensions has been significant.

Imran Khan, who announced the release of Indian pilot Abhinandan as "a gesture of peace" last week and extended an olive branch to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, has said that his government will not allow any terror group to use Pakistani soil for destabilizing other countries.

The remarks came days after his government announced a sweeping crackdown on armed groups, including Jaish e Mohammad (JeM), which was responsible for last month's deadly attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Addressing a public rally in southern Pakistan, Khan said a 'new era' is emerging in 'new Pakistan' and there was a huge desire to build a peaceful and stable Pakistan.

Pakistan has faced tremendous pressure from the international community, including its neighbors India, Afghanistan and Iran, urging it to take action against terror outfits based in Pakistan.

It is pertinent to note that a day before the attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir, which put the two neighbors at loggerheads again, an attack in Iran's southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan had claimed the lives of 24 IRGC personnel.

The attack in Sistan-Baluchistan drew sharp reaction in Iran with top military commanders and politicians blasting Pakistan and demanding immediate and appropriate action against Jaish e Adl, a militant group based in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, which claimed responsibility for the attack.

Earlier this week, Pakistan announced



crackdown against terrorists and so far 182 religious schools run by banned groups have been seized and more than 120 people detained, according to reports.

Khan said Pakistan desires peace and has also sent this message to New Delhi time and again.

"We also handed over to India their [captured] pilot, because we do not want war, and also offered Pakistan's cooperation to India after the [February 14] Pulwama incident," he said in his speech, adding that his government wants to fight poverty.

Khan said he talked to Indian PM Narendra Modi after assuming power and told him that the subcontinent faces highest levels of poverty in the world, and that all issues should be resolved through dialogue.

"But I did not know that Modi will do all this after launching his election campaign," he added, hinting that the war-frenzy benefits

Modi in his re-election bid. India goes to polls in May this year.

"If you (Modi) indulge in any bloodshed of Pakistanis to win the [upcoming] elections, there should not be any misunderstanding, we will retaliate," Khan said, addressing his Indian counterpart.

"Be it India or any [other] superpower, if anyone wants us to be subdued, we and our armed forces would fight to the end. Our people, as well as the armed forces, are fully prepared," he added.

Imran Khan said since he was born in an independent Pakistan but his parents were born in British India.

"When I describe Tipu Sultan as our hero, it is because of the fact that Tipu opted to fight for independence till his last blood, whereas [last Mughal Emperor] Bahadur Shah Zafar surrendered and accepted slavery," he said.

Int'l Women's Day:  
Celebrating women's resilience in the face of adversity

**1 →** It is pertinent to note that women in Palestine have been at the forefront of struggle for liberation of occupied territories from Zionists. They have paid the heavy price of defiance but haven't given up.

In Afghanistan, where the U.S.-led war and occupation has stretched into its 18th year, women have over the years broken the shackles of patriarchy and become a force to reckon with.

"Happy International Women's Day, especially to brave Afghan women that have been bearing the brunt of political shenanigans, primitive culture and senseless war for decades in Afghanistan," wrote a Twitter user Fatima.

Many Afghan women took to Twitter and Facebook on Friday to speak against the lack of women's representation in ongoing 'peace negotiations' between Taliban and U.S. officials.

In an interview with Tehran Times last week, former Afghan parliamentarian Farkhunda Zahra Naderi said lack of women's participation in the peace process will render it useless and ineffective.

In Pakistan, International Women's Day was marked by nationwide 'Aurat March' (women's march) on Friday, the objective of which was to celebrate the achievements of women and protest against the continued violence against them.

"Happy International Women's Day to all the wonderful women around the world. These two strong and incredible women whom I adored the most. Epitome of women struggle in Pakistan are missed immensely today," tweeted Ariba Jalbani, sharing pictures of former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto and human rights activist Asma Jahangir, both of whom were killed by terrorists.

Meanwhile, Krishna Kumari Kohli, a lower-caste Hindu woman elected as Pakistan's senator chaired a session of the Pakistani parliament to commemorate the International Women's Day.



In India, where #MeToo movement grabbed headlines recently, in which many women came out with harrowing stories of sexual harassment at workplace, the day was observed quietly.

However, in a startling move, India's Supreme Court granted bail to Babu Bajrangji, who had been convicted for his involvement in anti-Muslim pogrom in Indian state of Gujarat in 2002.

"Babu Bajrangji getting bail today is the best tribute our judiciary can pay to women on the eve of International Women's Day. Well done, India," tweeted Bobby Naqvi, editor at GulfNews.

In Yemen, women continue to press for their participation in peace negotiations between the various warring factions. "Women & children make up 75% of internally displaced people in Yemen and yet have no voice in peace negotia-

tion. On #InternationalWomensDay help lift their voices," tweeted one Maysam Ali.

In Saudi Arabia, women have been silently suffering for decades, as they are denied basic rights and their voices are muzzled with coercion and intimidation by the Kingdom's rulers.

Many women are languishing in jails without trail. On Friday, Walid Alhathloul wrote an article in The Guardian, calling for the release of his sister from Saudi captivity.

"International Women's Day, we celebrate the many achievements of women and stand together to demand equal rights," he wrote. "My sister, Loujain, is one of these brave gender equality activists — and for that she is now in jail. She has dedicated her life to gaining basic women's rights in our home country of Saudi Arabia, focusing mainly on the women's driving ban, male guardianship and domestic abuse."

Alhathloul said her sister has spent the last 10 months in a Saudi jail and has been subjected to "brutal torture and sexual harassment".

"This International Women's Day, support the fierce women who are challenging the status quo in Saudi Arabia & have lost their freedom because of it. Make a fierce choice, fight with them," tweeted Amnesty.

In Kashmir, women have been the worst victims of conflict over the past thirty years. There are thousands of widows and half-widows (women whose husbands disappeared) today.

"What can one say on Women's International Day when average Kashmir women' life, their children, their home and hearth, their privacy, their dignity, their calm, their safety and security all lie in tatters," wrote Prof. Hameeda Nayeem, a prominent civil society activist in Indian-held Kashmir on her Facebook.

"I could only pray to God to liberate us from the current situation so that we could also sing songs in unison with the free and advanced women of the world," she added.

## Netanyahu's political honeymoon over



with sheer disdain attacked media for accusing him of corruption. He has even muzzled their voices.

"Hundreds of journalists have been affected directly or indirectly by Netanyahu's moves, and Israelis have been besieged by the message that the media is the enemy rather than an instrument that protects them from tyranny," wrote Anat Balint, media researcher

at University of San Francisco, in Haaretz.

Like a typical bully with utter contempt for law, Netanyahu has often said that 'nothing will happen — because nothing has happened', since he has been winning elections due to manipulation and fraud.

Following the announcement by attorney general last week, Netanyahu termed the accusations a 'left-wing conspiracy', attack-

ing his political rivals who have launched a strong campaign against him.

Although Netanyahu is the first Israeli prime minister to be indicted for corruption, he is not the first one to be accused of corruption. Before him, Ehud Olmert in 2008 was forced to resign amid allegations of bribery. In 1977, Yitzhak Rabin had to resign after he was accused of holding illegal foreign bank accounts.

So, the legacy of corruption and mismanagement runs deep in Israel's political system. While others before him quietly stepped down, Netanyahu has so far refused to back off.

What impact Netanyahu's indictment will have on the upcoming general elections in Israel and his political future remains to be seen. While it is widely believed that he will not succumb to the pressure from judiciary and police, some of the charges are damning and can hurt him deeply.

Whether it will have any impact on the election result, we will know on April 9. But, irrespective of the poll outcome, what is certain is that Netanyahu's political honeymoon period is over. The future looks bleak for him and for the Zionist entity.



# Iran is losing regional and world gas market: Energy expert

**1 →** Iran has some natural gas projects. Iran-Pakistan pipeline will be one of Iran natural gas projects. Iran completed required infrastructure by 2014 to deliver natural gas to Iran-Pakistan border. But Pakistan due to financial problems and capabilities did not build pipeline to Iran-Pakistan border. Saudi is trying play important energy diplomacy in Pakistan. And during Bin Salman's visit to Pakistan they signed some agreements in energy sector and it seems that it will not be easy for Iran to export natural gas to Pakistan in short-term.

Iran has also planned to deliver natural gas to Oman by 2020, but by March 2019, there is going to be a major development in Iran-Oman pipeline. According to the agreement Iran must export 1.5 bcm natural gas to Oman. Iran also is interested to use Oman LNG facilities to produce LNG and export LNG. By October 2018, Oman Ministry of Oil set a tender to choose a company for construction pipeline in Oman territory.

■ Only %20 of Iran's gas export pipeline capacity to Basra, Iraq is active. Why Iran has not been able to utilize the full capacity of the pipeline?

A: The major problem is due to sanctions. Iraq can't pay for natural gas which imported from Iran. I think there is no major problem in natural gas production. During Summer Iran export more natural gas rather than winter. During winter domestic consumption is high and Ministry of Oil has to transit more natural gas to domestic pipeline network. It can be expected by coming months' capacity of natural gas export to Iraq to be increased. Domestic consumption in Iran is too high. Iran needs to use energy efficiency in all sectors to increase domestic consumption. At present majority of natural gas agreements are long term (20 or 25 years) and it is not clear why Iran-Iraq natural gas pipeline period is just



for six year. It possible for Iran to get oil and gas debt with Iraq currency Dinar.

■ Only 5 to 6 years remain to termination of the contract for the sale of Iranian gas to Turkey and Iraq, and on the other hand, Iran has not been able to find new markets for its gas. What should Iran do for exporting regarding to the increase of gas production?

A: Exporting natural gas to EU market is Iran second priority. Natural gas export to Europe requires a much longer pipeline than the Persian Gulf states. As you know, the only logical route to export gas from Iran to Europe is Turkey, although in the past, several transit routes were considered, including Iraq, Syria, the Islamic pipeline, Armenia and Georgia, but at present, Turkey is the right option for Iran to export gas exports to Europe.

The pipeline needed to transport gas from Assalouyeh to the Turkish border is about 2,000 kilometers. Exporting gas from Turkey

to the first European country also requires at least another 2,000 kilometers of pipeline, which is much longer than the 200-kilometer pipeline to the Persian Gulf states. Turkey, on the other hand, is not willing to transit Iran's gas because of its adoptive policies. It wants to be the gas hub itself, the recipient and distributor of gas, which is by no means accepted by Iran. In addition to the logistical and geopolitical issues associated with Iran's gas exports to Europe, there is also a price dispute.

During past year Iran and Turkey hold a round of negotiations to extend Iran-Turkey natural gas pipeline period. But there is no major progress in negotiations. Iran asked Turkey to import more natural gas and Turkey asked Iran to give more discount in natural gas price. Turkey is importing natural gas from TANAP project from Azerbaijan and by 2019 and Turkey will begin to import more natural gas from Russia via Turk Stream

project. Turkey also increase LNG import from Qatar and doubled importing LNG from US. Turkey also made huge investment in renewable energy. It means that Iran natural gas in Turkey energy market is losing its importance. Iran needs more active foreign policy and energy diplomacy to keep its share in regional market and also increase its share.

■ What will be the possible effect of completion of the North Stream II project on the future of Iranian gas exports?

A: In EU market there is major competition between Russia, Qatar, U.S. and Australia. Russia is using different pricing system and export policy for every country in EU market to keep and increase its share in EU market. U.S. is against EU's more dependency on Gazprom. Last December U.S. asked EU members to import more LNG from Qatar instead of importing natural gas from Russia. At present Russia has two major projects to deliver natural gas to EU market. Turk Stream and North Stream II. U.S. is against North Stream II.

U.S. due to shale gas revolution is trying to export more natural gas and LNG to neighbors and its allies. Germany needs Russia natural gas and has welcomed North Stream II project. All developments show that Iran will face major challenges to be a key player in natural gas market in both regional and world natural gas markets and also in short term or midterm it will be hard to Iran to be natural gas exporter to EU.

Due to U.S. sanctions no major foreign energy firms are interested to invest in Iran energy sector. In my opinion the major problem in Iran energy sector is that to attract foreign investment you need a legal framework, an efficient and fast decision process and political stability (especially in the international context). These variables are far from being achieved as we speak".

## Iran wants peace. Will U.S. allow peace with Iran?

By Kevin Zeese & Margaret Flowers

We just returned from nine days in Iran with a 28-person peace delegation organized by CODE PINK. It is clear that people in Iran want two things:

1. To be respected as an independent, sovereign nation
2. To have peace with the United States without threats of war or economic sanctions seeking to dominate them.

The path to those goals requires the United States to change its policies toward Iran as the U.S. has a long history of interference in Iranian politics with disastrous results. The U.S. must stop its belligerence and engage in honest, respectful dialogue with the government of Iran.

One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to the Tehran Peace Museum. On the way to the Peace Museum, we passed the site of the former U.S. Embassy, now called the "U.S. Den of Espionage Museum." This was where the U.S. ruled Iran through the Shah until the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The U.S. installed the brutal Shah as a dictator after it worked with Great Britain to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 in a coup that was one of the greatest foreign policy mistakes of U.S. history.

At the Peace Museum, we were welcomed by the director, a veteran of the Iraq-Iran War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988 and given a tour of the museum by two other veterans. The war, which began shortly after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, would not have been possible without U.S. encouragement and support in the form of money, naval assistance and weapons. More than one million people were killed and 80,000 people were injured by chemical weapons in that war.

Two of our tour guides had been victims of a chemical attack and they still suffer from the exposure. One was injured by mustard gas, which impacts the nerves, eyes, and lungs. Eye drop medications are not available because of the U.S. sanctions; so this veteran uses onions to make himself cry tears to alleviate the symptoms. Listening to his persistent coughing, we felt ashamed that the U.S. both provided Iraq with the ingredients needed for the chemical weapons and now punishes people further by sanctions that deny essential medicines.

At the Peace Museum, our delegation gave the museum books on war and peace activism. One gift was a beautiful, hand made book by Barbara Briggs-Letson of California that was written in memory of the 289 Iranians killed when a U.S. missile shot down a commercial Iranian airliner in July 1988. The entire Peace Delegation signed the book and made statements of remorse. The book contained the names of



every person killed written in Farsi as well as Iranian poetry. Fmr. President George H.W. Bush is infamous for saying, "I will never apologize for the United States — I don't care what the facts are... I'm not an apologize-for-America kind of guy," so our delegation apologized.

Led by Sandy Rea, we sang Dona nobis pacem (Latin for "Grant us peace"). This brought the room together sharing powerful emotions calling for peace, with tears and hugs between the Peace Delegation and the Iranians who run the Tehran Peace Museum.

The delegation next visited the largest cemetery in Tehran where tens of thousands of Iranians are buried. We visited a section of several thousand who were killed in the Iraq-Iran War, all known as martyrs. The graves contained headstones, many with etched photographs of the war dead and information about their lives. They also contained the wish or lesson they had for others noted in a small booklet the soldier created to be shared in the event of death. There was a section for the unknown soldiers killed in the war and one for civilian casualties — mostly innocent women and children killed in the war.

The cemetery was filled with people visiting gravesites of loved ones from the war. One woman approached the group to tell us that her only son died at twenty years of age in the war and she visits his grave every day. A guide who was traveling with us told us every family in Iran has been impacted by this war.

A highlight of the trip was an extraordinary meeting with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who painstakingly negotiated the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated

between China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States plus Germany and the European Union and Iran for more than a decade. He explained that negotiations began in 2005 and were completed and signed in 2015. Iran complied with all the requirements of the agreement, but the U.S. did not lift sanctions, as promised, and exited the deal under President Trump.

Zarif, a long-time diplomat holding many important roles in Iranian affairs, was very generous with his time spending 90 minutes with us. He first asked us to speak about what questions we had, then spoke for 60 minutes and answered more questions.

Zarif explained the root cause of the problems between the United States and Iran. It is not about oil, Iran's form of government or even about nuclear weapons, it is about Iran's 1979 revolution which made the country independent of U.S. Empire after being under its control since the 1953 coup. Iran wants to be respected as a sovereign nation that decides its own domestic and foreign policy, not dominated

by the United States. If the U.S. can respect the sovereignty of Iran as a nation, then there will be peace between our nations. If the U.S. insists on domination, the conflict will continue threatening the security of the region and undermining peace and prosperity for both nations.

It is up to us. Even though U.S. "democracy" offers the people of the United States limited power, as we are forced to choose between two parties funded by Wall Street and both supporting a militarist foreign policy, we need to impact our government so it stops threatening nations, undermining their economies with illegal sanctions, and respects people of the world. Iran shows us the urgency of becoming a world beyond war.

Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers co-direct *Popular Resistance*. Zeese is a member of the *advisory board of World Beyond War*.

(Source: World Beyond War)



## Sanders will criticize Trump

**1 →** On the other hand, Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate who was supported by her husband, Bill Clinton, and many influential figures in the party, managed to defeat Sanders with her secret lobbies, and went to fight Trump as Democrats' final candidate. Anyhow, if Sanders were to reach the final round of the 2016 presidential competitions, he could have defeated Trump and enter the White House.

Sanders, however, was the victim of Democrat leaders and Hillary Clinton's secret lobbies. It was not without a reason that many Sanders advocates voted for Hillary Clinton's rival, Donald Trump!

Ultimately, the tensions between Trump and Sanders in the U.S. presidential election of 2020 will be of great interest to many Americans. If the Sanders win in the Democratic Party, this conflict will become more intense and more serious.

A topic that the president of the United States and his entourage are scared of.

## Hamas and new mistake

**1 →** Meanwhile, on March 1, 2019, Ashark Al-Awsat, a mouthpiece of Saudi propaganda, published an article according to which Hamas detained the leader of the local Islamic Al-Sabireen movement Hisham Salim and his assistants. Circumstances of this incident are no longer specified. It is known that Al-Sabireen is a faction that has never concealed its IRI orientation.

Taking into account the nature of pro-Saudi publications, it is difficult to expect objectivity from them at all, so it is not necessary to seriously evaluate their materials, the news itself is important. In fact, there's been another "shake-down" on the organization of Islamic resistance from the ruling Hamas movement, which is not the first time. If earlier this could be explained by the influence of Qatar (i.e. under pressure of Doha, Hamas was forced to push against pro-Iranian structures in Gaza), the latter act, in my view, has other roots. The reason is the junta of Egypt.

Over the past couple of years, close contacts have been established between the junta and Hamas, from the point of view of Cairo they need a mouthpiece on the Palestinian issue (and steps in this direction are dictated from Washington), and for Hamas it is extremely important not to allow the crisis in the blockaded Gaza to worsen. Accordingly, the parties come to a compromise. And here it is important to note that the war criminals of Egypt are ready to accept the presence of Qatar in Gaza, but absolutely against the influence of the Islamic Republic.

Since it is dangerous to do this directly and is fraught with consequences (for example, the Zionists at the moment do not need a mini-war with Hamas, which is considered to be an "ally" of Iran) tactical maneuvers are being used. One of such maneuvers is to use its allies, which in parallel are important for Hamas at the present time, it is referred to Egypt and Qatar.

Despite the existing trivial "contradictions" between these Arab countries, we must not forget the key factor in the conduct of their foreign and domestic policies — they are the puppets of Washington and world Zionism. Therefore, the requirement for Hamas to block the Al-Sabireen movement is one of the conditions from the Egyptian junta, which lent the relay of the anti-Iran policy in the Gaza Strip from Qatar, and thus deliberately forces Hamas to take steps against the local allies of Tehran, which is according to the plan of external (over the ocean) provocateurs should adversely affect the connections between Hamas and IRI.

Influencing Hamas through the junta, the goal of Zionists and Americans is simple, to create new problems in the relationship between Hamas and Iran. And even if it were necessary to recognize the temporary coexistence of Zionism with Hamas, the main thing is to tear off the Palestinian movement from Tehran. Hamas needs to understand that sooner or later it will be necessary to make a final choice in terms of reference to external allies and decide on its own strategy, where the main issue is the "resistance or recognition of occupation". Hamas is in the trap of a regional game and can only come out of it after a stage of "internal revolution". But we must not forget that having fallen into a trap we will have to undergo a painful procedure according to the old principle, to get rid of a part of "our organism".

The Al-Sabireen movement has nothing to be chided for; they are only the victims of the intrigues of Western professional provocateurs, and such scenarios will not be the last time for them. Here should be added the ayah from the Quran "... (He) relieves from the burden and shackles that were imposed on them [by oppressors] ...", (Quran, 7: 157 Heights). P.S.

The position of the leadership of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad is bewildering, that regularly gives no response as to the pressing of the Al-Sabireen movement by the Hamas. The PIJ ignores the problems of its colleagues, even the former ones. Apparently the leaders of the PIJ are not embarrassed that brothers of the similar ideology, put forward by the martyr Fathi Shaqaqi, are subjected to moral attack. In this case, maybe the ideology no longer plays any role at all for some PIJ figures?

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Tender descriptions:

The Tender holder	Registration No. through national electronic tendering system	Tender No. /Tender No.	Estimated value (Rial/Euro)
National Iranian Drilling Company	3181430	TenderNo.PEPP/PH 17-18/97/001 Indent No:9722002	15,834,000,000 RIAL

Qualitative evaluation of tenders

Method	£ Based on minimum scoring ( 60) made in award criterion reflected in the tenderers pre-qualification forms.
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Purchasing & Submitting

Tender Document Distribution by Company	The distribution of the documents will be started one day after the publishing of second advertisement and ended on the following tenth day thereof
Distribution Place	A) Hall No.316, 3thfloor, Drilling Projects Foreign Procurement Dept. National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN 061-34146284 B) Jomhour street , yaghma alley nio: 8th building floor no : 04 room no 428 -Tehran -Iran 021-66700249
Submitting Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt in the amount of 510.000 Iranian Rials under account number 4001114004020491 in name of "NIDC Incomes Centralized Fund" issued by I.R. of Iran Central Bank ( Shaba No.:IR 520100004001114004020491 )</li> <li>Submitting format Request for the purpose of receiving Tender Documents</li> </ul>
Closing date	Days after the last time of Purchasing 14
Documents Receiving Method	Address Hall No. 107, 1-floor, Tender Committee, Operation building, National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN. Tel : +98-61-34148580 +98-61-34148569

Tender Guarantee

Value of guarantee	792,000,000 Rial / 16,322 Euro
Type of guarantee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bank guarantees or guarantees issued by non-bank institutions that obtain activity license from the central bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran.</li> <li>Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt under account number 4001114006376636 in name of "NIDC saving account" by the central bank of Islamic Republic of Iran.</li> <li>Saba No.:IR350100004001114006376636</li> </ul>
Duration of credit & quotation	Tender Guarantee and quotation should be valid for 90 days and extendable maximum for one time in initial validity duration.

(Name of department) Foreign Mats. Procurement (Drilling Projects)

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# ‘Iran exports \$25m of medicine, medical devices to Iraq’

**HEALTH DESK** TEHRAN — Iran exports \$25 million of medicine and medical devices to Iraq annually and has the capacity to increase the figure to \$200 million, the director of the Iranian Food and Drug Administration (IFDA) announced, IRNA reported on Thursday.

Mehdi Pirsalehi made the remarks during a meeting with Iraqi Trade Minister Mohammed Hashim Al-Aanisaid in Tehran on March 7.

Despite the agreement signed between the two countries, the Iranian medicines are not registered in Iraq in due time, Pirsalehi lamented.

Up to now, 120 Iranian medical products undergo the registration procedure,

but only 20 of them are registered in Iraq, he explained.

Iraq can save 50 percent foreign exchange by importing Iranian medicine, he said.

Pirsalehi said that Iran annually exports \$80 million of cosmetics and hygiene products to its neighboring country.

Iran expects Iraq to help it for transferring money to European countries for buying medicines and medical devices, which is a hard task due to the sanctions, he said.

“Unfortunately the U.S.-imposed sanctions have a negative impact on the medicine market in Iran,” he lamented.

Iran and Iraq can facilitate the import



## ‘Iran’s medical export to Iraq can increase to \$200 million per year’

and export of food products between the two countries through the establishment of joint laboratories in border regions.

“Due to the short expiry period of food products, it would be a great way to facilitate their export and import,” he added.

During the meeting, Mohammed Hashim Al-Aanisaid said that Iraq’s

Ministry of Health does its best to expand and facilitate cooperation in the field of medicine and medical device with Iran.

Iran has made various scientific and technological achievements over recent years and Iraq is eager to boost its relations in different fields including health with Iran, he explained.

## Getting fit in 40s, 50s still can add to life span

It’s truly never too late to begin exercising, new research shows.

Even for people who were “couch potatoes” in their youth, embarking on a regimen of regular exercise in middle-age can still greatly cut the odds for death from any cause, a major new study finds.

The study tracked the health -- and lifetime exercise patterns -- of more than 315,000 people who were members of AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons).

The investigators found that folks who’d exercised all their lives had a 36 percent lower risk of dying during the study period, compared to people who’d never exercised.

But, perhaps surprisingly, people who’d been inactive in youth but decided to get more physical in their 40s and 50s saw almost the same decline -- 35 percent -- in their odds for an early death.

This suggests “that midlife is not too late to start physical activity,” according to the research team led by Pedro



Saint-Maurice of the U.S. National Cancer Institute. “Inactive adults may be encouraged to be more active, whereas young adults who are already active may strive to maintain their

activity level as they get older,” the study authors wrote.

What’s more, a mid-life start to physical activity seemed to cut the odds of death from the two major killers -- heart disease and cancer. The study found that for people who began exercising in their 40s and 50s, rates of death from heart disease fell by 43 percent compared to people who’d never exercised, and the cancer death rate fell by 16 percent.

Those declines were similar to those seen in people who’d exercised all their adult lives, the researchers noted.

“This study, once again, portrays the importance of physical activity in relationship to one’s long-term mortality,” said cardiologist Dr. Evelina Grayver, who wasn’t involved in the new research.

“Whether or not you start exercising when you are younger or older, the benefits will always be there,” said Grayver, who directs the coronary care unit at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, N.Y.

(Source: webmd.com)

## HIV-cured patient case could ‘open the door’ to new gene therapies, scientist says

The landmark case of a patient who has recovered completely from HIV could “open the door” to developing new treatments for the virus, a scientist has said.

The unnamed patient became the second person in history to recover from HIV after a stem cell transplant, researchers announced on Tuesday.

He received cells from a donor with a rare genetic mutation known as CCR5-delta 32, which confers natural resistance to HIV.

The man, known as the ‘London patient’ has not taken HIV drugs in 18 months and the virus has not returned.

Ravinder Gupta, a professor at University College London, said the team who worked on the case was “very excited” over the patient’s recovery. “The HIV community in general has been somewhat disillusioned about whether we can achieve cures for large numbers of people,” he said.

The scientist told BBC Radio 4 that the patient’s case “does open the door to understanding whether we can use gene therapy approaches to modify CCR5, which is the co-receptor of HIV”.

But he added that the transplant could not be used to treat large numbers of people.

“It’s clearly not a translatable approach for the general population who have HIV because the mortality associated with the transplant is significant,” he said.

Despite this, the scientist remains optimistic about the development of an affordable future treatment.

“If you achieve remission you avoid lifelong antiretroviral therapy for millions of individuals and so I think the science just needs to be done and the economics should follow,” he said, when asked about the financial accessibility of a possible treatment.

Timothy Ray Brown, the first man to ever be cured of HIV, was treated in Germany, using a similar procedure.

Gero Hutter, the doctor who treated Mr. Brown, called the new case “great news” and “one piece in the HIV cure puzzle”.

Members of the scientific community hailed the London patient’s recovery but many urged caution and said stem cell transplants were unlikely to be used for most patients.

“The report of a second case of HIV remission is of great interest but does not move the scientific field forward very significantly,” said Sarah Fidler, from Imperial College London.

“Rather, it reinforces the science that this is rare but feasible. The treatment this patient received is not safe, and not scalable. It is certainly not an option to be recommended for people living with HIV who are doing well on antiretroviral therapy.”

“If we can understand better why the procedure works in some patients and not others, we will be closer to our ultimate goal of curing HIV,” said Graham Cooke of Imperial College London.

Stem cell transplants typically are harsh procedures which start with radiation or chemotherapy to damage the body’s existing immune system and make room for a new one.

There can be complications involved and other attempts at treating HIV with this approach have failed.

(Source: The Independent)

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## Mazandaran villages ready to host Noruz holidaymakers

**TOURISM** **TEHRAN** — Necessary arrangements for hosting travelers during Noruz (New Year holidays, starting March 21) have been made in 208 villages across Mazandaran province, northern Iran, a local official has said, IRNA reported.

Of the 208 villages, 126 are considered as travel destinations and 82 as stopover spots, Hassan Asgharian-Rostami said. Mazandaran, which is home to more than 3500 villages and



rural areas, hosted over three million night-stays during the previous Noruz holidays, the official explained.

Provincial statistics indicates that more than 11 million domestic holidaymakers visited Mazandaran from March 18 to 30, showing around 15 percent year-on-year increase.

Stretched along the Caspian Sea and Alborz mountain range, Mazandaran is a popular destination for domestic holidaymakers and it is home to over 70 eco-lodges.

## Tourism industry fears ‘no-deal’ Brexit will cost it billions

Travel specialists say the overseas tourism industry could lose billions over the next five years if Britain crashes out of the European Union later this month without a divorce deal.

With just three weeks to go until Britain’s scheduled departure from the bloc, the two sides have yet to agree a mutually acceptable deal.

Executives at the ITB travel trade fair in Berlin said many holidaymakers were in wait-and-see mode as uncertainty over visas, insurance and whether they will need an international licence to drive in EU countries weighed on sentiment.

“Brexit is a concern,” Mark Okerstrom, chief executive of on-line-booking platform Expedia told reporters, adding it had seen a significant slowdown in people booking flights from and to the UK beyond the scheduled March 29 departure date.

Consultancy firm Oxford Economics said a no-deal Brexit could cause a 5 percent fall in overseas travel and tourism trips by Britons in 2020. Market researcher Euromonitor said it would curb overseas spending by \$5.3 billion (4.1 billion pounds) between 2019-2025.

“We’re not seeing that people aren’t booking at all, but they are waiting a bit longer to make their decisions,” said Christoph Debus, Chief Airlines Officer at Thomas Cook Group, adding Brexit would hit tour operators harder than airlines.

Caroline Bremner, Head of Travel Research at Euromonitor, said tour operators were trying to encourage early booking with flexible payment deals, low deposits and free child places, while some destinations, like Greece, have cut their prices.

Spain, the most popular destination for British sunseekers who accounted for 9 percent of foreign visitors last year, is seen as the biggest loser from a no-deal Brexit, which could wipe off more than \$1 billion in spending between 2019-2025, according to Euromonitor.

(Source: Euronews)



## ROUND THE GLOBE

### Heart of Neolithic Orkney

The group of monuments that make up the Heart of Neolithic Orkney consists of a remarkably well-preserved settlement, a large chambered tomb, and two stone circles with surrounding henges, together with a number of associated burial and ceremonial sites.



The group constitutes a major relict cultural landscape graphically depicting life five thousand years ago in this remote archipelago.

The four monuments that make up the Heart of Neolithic Orkney are unquestionably among the most important Neolithic sites in Western Europe. These are the Ring of Brodgar, Stones of Stenness, Maeshowe and Skara Brae. They provide exceptional evidence of the material and spiritual standards as well as the beliefs and social structures of this dynamic period of prehistory.

The four main monuments, consisting of the four substantial surviving standing stones of the elliptical Stones of Stenness and the surrounding ditch and bank of the henge, the thirty-six surviving stones of the circular Ring of Brodgar with the thirteen Neolithic and Bronze Age mounds that are found around it and the stone setting known as the Comet Stone, the large stone chambered tomb of Maeshowe, whose passage points close to midwinter sunset, and the sophisticated settlement of Skara Brae with its stone built houses connected by narrow roofed passages, together with the Barnhouse Stone and the Watch Stone, serve as a paradigm of the megalithic culture of north-western Europe that is unparalleled.

(Source: UNESCO)

# Sediments, wastewaters threaten UNESCO-tagged hydraulic ensemble

**HERITAGE** **TEHRAN** — Iran’s Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System is under threat of excessive amounts of mineral salt and wastewaters that perpetually pass through the southwestern UNESCO World Heritage.

“These days, due to the increase in salt contents in the waters flowing into this [world] heritage complex, dandruff and salt deposits are seen in different parts of the structure,” ILNA quoted Mohammad-Hossein Arastouzadeh, the director of the world heritage site, as saying on Friday.

The ensemble comprises bridges, weirs, tunnels, canals and a series of ancient watermills powered by human-made waterfalls. It is named after an ancient city of the same name with its history dating back to the time of Darius the Great, the Achaemenid king.

Talking on wastewaters which run from the modern city of Shushtar, the official explained, “Wastewaters were planned to be connected to a sewage network on a [previous] scheduled time. Unfortunately, the network is developing slowly so that urban wastewaters are entering Karun River and consequently pouring into the historical hydraulic ensemble.”

“Due to the fact that the sewage network is currently being constructed in Shushtar, we must wait for the completion of this project... to fully resolve this problem,” he added.

Some experts put the blame on Gotvand Dam when it comes to increasing salty waters in Khuzestan province. It is one of the biggest dams in the country, which was completed in 2012 over the Karun River.

In 2018, Hamidreza Khoda-Bakhshi, president of Khuzestan’s Association of Water Engineers, said “According to studies by University of Tehran, Gotvand Dam has increased the salt in the Karun River by 35 percent.”

Inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage list in 2009 as a ‘masterpiece of creative genius’, the Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System is a destination for history buffs, nature lovers and travelers who eyewitness how the prehistoric yet homogeneous hydraulic system works.

“The Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System testifies to the heritage and the synthesis of earlier Elamite and Mesopotamian knowhow; it was probably influenced by the Petra dam and tunnel and by Roman civil engineering,” UNESCO says.



A view of the Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System in Khuzestan province, southwest Iran.

## Prehistoric human remains, coffins, potteries unearthed in Hamedan

**HERITAGE** **TEHRAN** — A team of Iranian archaeologists has recently unearthed prehistoric human remains, coffins and potteries during an urgent excavation in Hamedan, west-central Iran.

“Five graves with clay coffins in shape of a bathtub or boat, two jar-shaped coffins, and two tombs bearing no coffins were among the excavated objects,” CHTN quoted archaeologist Mohammad Shabani as saying on Thursday.

“The emergency excavation was carried out in Hamedan’s Imam Khomeini Sq. along a pedestrian path and within an area in the middle of the square, which was previously dig out for making a fountain,” he said, addressing audiences

at the 16th Annual Symposium on the Iranian Architecture.

The survey yielded “large volumes” of cultural data on earthenware, burial services, and archaeology, Shabani stated.

“Excepting one of burial places, others are dating from Achaemenid era (550-330 BC) to early Parthian epoch (247 BC–224 CE).”

A large proportion of the findings around Imam Sq. is associated with vestiges of potteries that date back to various historical times including the Islamic era, he said.

Modern Hamedan largely lies on ancient Ecbatana, which was the capital of Media and subsequently a summer residence of the Achaemenian kings.

## Iran to ease visa rules for Iraqi Kurdistan travelers

**1 →** Iran’s tourism department has announced it would end the practice of stamping visitors’ passports in a bid to save the industry while the United States ramps up efforts to isolate the Islamic Republic.

Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization Director Ali-Asghar Mounesan, said in November that the government would

introduce protectionist measures to support the tourism industry. Police and the Foreign Ministry backed the move to stop putting entry and exit stamps into visitors’ passports.

Some two million Iraqi nationals visited the country during the first seven months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018), constituting Iran’s largest

source of tourists.

According to Iran’s tourism body, people of Iran’s neighboring countries were used to visit Iran for pilgrimage, trade and work but nowadays Iraqi and Azerbaijani nationals are mostly pursue medical services, a kind of tourism which usually fetches good income for the country.



## Iranian hospitality, best reason to visit Iran

By Aleksandr Popkov

An unexpected happened. My trip to Iran that I booked at the last minute, came out one of the best in the recent years. In this post, I will explain why.

I have several Iranian friends in Helsinki. One of them was visiting family and told I can stay at their place, another married a guy from Finland and they were making the wedding in Iranian style. Good enough reason to go? I booked a flight to Tehran.

Plus in the end, there would be few experiences/stores, that can help you getting around. Stay tuned.

There is one significant reason to visit Iran – Iranian people. I cannot thank them enough, they made my trip in Iran. Foreigners are rare, so Iranians have a sincere interest and are very welcoming. They want to share a part of their live with you.

I prefer my vacations to be spontaneous, I decide what to do on the same day. (I have enough planning at work in Finland and need rest away from people who can discuss their retirement at age of 25.)

In Iran, I happen to be surrounded by people, who each day, quite randomly decide where to go. Felt a lot like Home (St. Petersburg). I think, because of this, I stayed most of the time in Tehran, without going to smaller, probably more authentic cities.

**■ Visiting Iran, what is it like?**

When I told my friends I wanna to go to Iran – everyone had kinda mixed opinions. Those, who already been there told that they are envious, because Iran was one of the best



places they’ve been to. At the same time, many in Europe hear only nasty things from the Middle East. They were seriously worried.

I felt a little nervous when I arrived, but it all dissipated as soon as I was in a company of Iranian people. It felt weird seeing all the contrast. There are all these displays of military around you and random cute things just right next to them...

**■ Iranian Hospitality, where can it bring you?**

“Iranian hospitality can bring you to hospital,” says Vahid (my Iranian friend in Helsinki).

It gets weird sometimes. People can endlessly argue about who’s paying the bill. I mean, everyone tries to pay, instead of splitting it.

At barber shop:

• How much do I owe you?

- Nothing
- Is it a joke?
- No
- Why?
- Because we love foreigners!

In Europe, it takes an effort to get to know people. In Iran, people want to get to know you. I think it is partly the famous Iranian hospitality, partly curiosity. Foreigners are rare. Sitting together with friends (and friends’ friends) I just mentioned that I have no particular plan, and they were suggesting me good places to visit and offering their company.

If you visit Iran, I think, you can just find some lovely people, who you can trust and see where it brings you. Locals have their own favorite spots, often inaccessible without speaking Farsi. You can, of course, read a regular guide and visit the main sights, where you can get around with English, but I don’t think it is going to be as good.

**■ Travel realities and tips**

My post probably made it look like everything about traveling Iran is just perfect. It is not, but I find that positive things by far outweigh small difficulties that you may face. Here are few things that I think a traveler should be aware of.

**■ Conclusion**

Overall, the trip was more than satisfying, one of the best travel experiences of my life. I doubt that it would be the same without Iranian people helping me out. I think, getting to know the people, is the first thing a traveler should do. Foreigners are rare and there are many locals, who would like to share a journey with you and show their favorite spots.

(Source: Engineer on Tour)

## Ancient mass child sacrifice discovered in Peru may be world’s largest

The remains of nearly 140 children dating to the year 1450 have been unearthed along the northern coast of Peru. Archaeologists say the burial is the site of the largest known mass child sacrifice in the world.

The children – as well as the remains of more than 200 young llamas – were found in a mass grave located on a cliff just a thousand feet from the Pacific Ocean in the small, present-day fishing community of La Libertad near Trujillo. Archaeologists say the children and llamas were slaughtered all at once in a ritual sacrifice performed by the ancient Chimú civilization. It is thought the children and llamas were killed during a time when an extreme El Niño weather system was

wreaking havoc on the Peruvian coastline.

Like many pre-Columbian cultures, the Chimú practiced human and animal sacrifice during religious rituals intended to appease their gods. But until now, archaeologists didn’t think that the Chimú empire killed large numbers of children. Child sacrifices of this magnitude are unprecedented not only in this region, but in the world, the researchers say. Previously, the largest confirmed child sacrifice involved 42 children at the Aztec Templo Mayor in modern-day Mexico City.

Finding an even bigger instance of mass child sacrifice is unusual, raising a number of questions about what drove the Chimú to massacre so many young boys and girls.

The researchers pieced together what they know so far in a paper published online in PLOS ONE on Wednesday, which chronicles the discovery originally made in 2018 at the site known as Huanchaquito-Las Llamas.

Anthropologist John Verano, who assisted with the excavation and analysis, said the death toll alone suggests that the Chimú performed the sacrifices in response to a catastrophic event. A number of other Chimú sacrificial sites have been found in the area, but none were exclusively devoted to children.

“We never expected to find a sacrifice site like this. But now that we know about this practice, we can begin to theorize why such

a mass offering might have been made. I think it suggests that there was some major crisis that needed to be mitigated by a special sacrifice such as this one,” Verano said.

Another clue that points to a civilization in chaos was buried along with the bodies. Unusual mud layers and preserved footprints near the graves suggest the sacrifice followed heavy rainfall. This normally arid region may have been crippled by extreme, wet weather brought on by an El Niño system. Chimú leaders may have interpreted the inclement weather as punishment from the gods and planned a drastic sacrifice to quell their wrath.

(Source: Discover Magazine)



# Improved regulation needed as pesticides found to affect genes in bees, research suggests

Scientists are urging for improved regulation on pesticides after finding that they affect genes in bumblebees, according to research led by Queen Mary University of London in collaboration with Imperial College London.

For the first time, researchers applied a biomedically inspired approach to examine changes in the 12,000 genes that make up bumblebee workers and queens after pesticide exposure.

The study, published in Molecular Ecology, shows that genes which may be involved in a broad range of biological processes are affected.

They also found that queens and workers respond differently to pesticide exposure and that one pesticide they tested had much stronger effects than the other did.

Other recent studies, including previous work by the authors, have revealed that exposure even to low doses of these neurotoxic pesticides is detrimental to colony function and survival as it impairs bee behaviors including the ability to obtain pollen and nectar from flowers and the ability to locate their nests.

### ■ There is a major risk

Lead author of the study Dr. Yannick Wurm, from Queen Mary University of London, said: "Governments had approved what they thought were 'safe' levels but pesticides intoxicate many pollinators, reducing their dexterity and cognition and ultimately sur-



vival. This is a major risk because pollinators are declining worldwide yet are essential for maintaining the stability of the ecosystem and for pollinating crops.

"While newer pesticide evaluation aims to consider the impact on behavior, our work demonstrates a highly sensitive approach that can dramatically improve how we evaluate the effects of pesticides."

The researchers exposed colonies of bum-

blebees to either clothianidin or imidacloprid at field-realistic concentrations while controlling for factors including colony social environment and worker age.

They found clothianidin had much stronger effects than imidacloprid — both of which are in the category of 'neonicotinoid' pesticides and both of which are still used worldwide although they were banned in 2018 for outdoor use by the European Union.

**“While newer pesticide evaluation aims to consider the impact on behavior, our work demonstrates a highly sensitive approach that can dramatically improve how we evaluate the effects of pesticides.”**

### ■ Worker bumblebees

For worker bumblebees, the activity levels of 55 genes were changed by exposure to clothianidin with 31 genes showing higher activity levels while the rest showed lower activity levels after exposure.

This could indicate that their bodies are reorienting resources to try to detoxify, which the researchers suspect is what some of the genes are doing. For other genes, the changes could represent the intermediate effects of intoxication that lead to affected behavior.

Dr. Joe Colgan, first author of the study and also from Queen Mary University of London, said: "This shows that worker and queen bumblebees are differently wired and that the pesticides do not affect them in the same way. As workers and queens perform different but complementary activities essential for colony function, improving our understanding of how both types of colony member are affected by pesticides is vital for assessing the risks these chemicals pose."

The researchers believe that the approach they have demonstrated must now be applied more broadly. This will provide detailed information on how pesticides differ in the effects they have on beneficial species, and why species may differ in their susceptibility.

(Source: phys.org)

## ‘Goldilocks’ stars may be ‘just right’ for finding habitable worlds, new study says

Scientists looking for signs of life beyond our Solar System face major challenges, one of which is that there are hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy alone to consider. To narrow the search, they must figure out: What kinds of stars are most likely to host habitable planets?

A new study finds a particular class of stars called K stars, which are dimmer than the sun but brighter than the faintest stars, may be particularly promising targets for searching for signs of life.

Why? First, K stars live a very long time -- 17 billion to 70 billion years, compared to 10 billion years for the sun -- giving plenty of time for life to evolve. Also, K stars have less extreme activity in their youth than the universe's dimmest stars, called M stars or "red dwarfs."

M stars do offer some advantages for in the search for habitable planets. They are the most common star type in the galaxy, comprising about 75 percent of all the stars in the universe. They are also frugal with their fuel, and could shine on for over a trillion years. One example of an M star, TRAPPIST-1, is known to host seven Earth-size rocky planets.

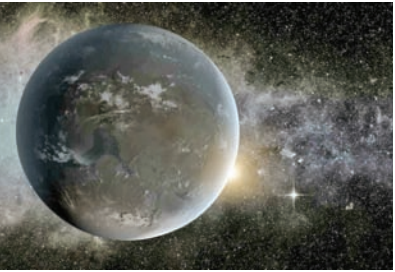
### ■ Problems for potential life

But the turbulent youth of M stars presents problems for potential life. Stellar flares -- explosive releases of magnetic energy -- are much more frequent and energetic from young M stars than young sun-like stars. M stars are also much brighter when they are young, for up to a billion years after they form, with energy that could boil off oceans on any planets that might someday be in the habitable zone.

"I like to think that K stars are in a 'sweet spot' between Sun-analog stars and M stars," said Giada Arney of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland.

Arney wanted to find out what biosignatures, or signs of life, might look like on a hypothetical planet orbiting a K star. Her analysis is published in the Astrophysical Journal Letters.

Scientists consider the simultaneous presence of oxygen and methane in a planet's atmosphere to be a strong biosignature because these gases like



to react with each other, destroying each other. So, if you see them present in an atmosphere together, that implies something is producing them both quickly, quite possibly life, according to Arney.

### ■ Amounts of oxygen and methane

However, because planets around other stars (exoplanets) are so remote, there needs to be significant amounts of oxygen and methane in an exoplanet's atmosphere for it to be seen by observatories at Earth. Arney's analysis found that the oxygen-methane biosignature is likely to be stronger around a K star than a Sun-like star.

Arney used a computer model that simulates the chemistry and temperature of a planetary atmosphere, and how that atmosphere responds to different host stars. These synthetic atmospheres were then run through a model that simulates the planet's spectrum to show what it might look like to future telescopes.

"When you put the planet around a K star, the oxygen does not destroy the methane as rapidly, so more of it can build up in the atmosphere," said Arney. "This is because the K star's ultraviolet light does not generate highly reactive oxygen gases that destroy methane as readily as a sun-like star."

This stronger oxygen-methane signal has also been predicted for planets around M stars, but their high activity levels might make M stars unable to host habitable worlds.

K stars can offer the advantage of a higher probability of simultaneous oxygen-methane detection compared to sun-like stars without the disadvantages that come along with an M star host.

(Source: sciencedaily.com)

## Scientists have built a prototype ‘anti-laser’ that swallows light

In recent years scientists have started exploring the concept of anti-lasers - devices that can perfectly absorb a particular wavelength of light, as opposed to emitting it the way a laser does.

Now researchers have published a study that explores the blueprint for building an anti-laser that's more complex than anything we've seen before.

More than an anti-laser, this team's device is a 'random anti-laser': capable of absorbing waves randomly scattered in all directions. This ability could have a variety of potential uses, in everything from phone antennas to medical equipment -- anywhere waves are captured. An anti-laser may sound wild, but it's actually pretty much what it says on the tin. You can think of such a device as a laser light burst happening in reverse - getting swallowed up rather than beamed out, according to the researchers.

"So far, anti-lasers have only been realized in one-dimensional structures onto which laser light was directed from opposite sides," says one of the team, Stefan Rotter from the Vienna University of Technology in Austria.

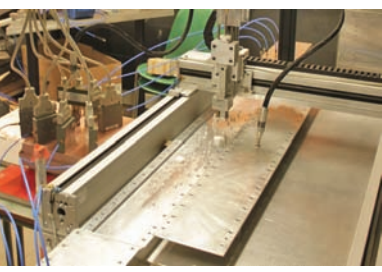
### ■ A much more general approach

"Our approach is much more general: we were able to show that even arbitrarily complicated structures in two or three dimensions can perfectly absorb a suitably tailored wave. In this way, this novel concept can also be used for a much wider range of applications."

It's that versatility and flexibility that sets this new anti-laser apart from what previous such devices. The team worked up a set of calculations and computer simulations to theorize how such a perfectly absorbing anti-laser might work, then backed them up with physical lab tests.

Key to the process is finding a wave front for the incoming signals in order to perfectly absorb them. That then enables the absorption of waves that aren't arriving in predictable ways, but rather as scattered signals bouncing in from multiple sources.

"Waves that are being scattered in a complex way are really all around us -- think about a mobile phone signal that is reflected several times before it reaches



your cell phone," says Rotter.

"This multiple scattering is made practical use of in so-called random lasers. Such exotic lasers are based on a disordered medium with a random internal structure that can trap light and emit a very complicated, system-specific laser field when supplied with energy."

When it came to building their own anti-laser, the scientists set up a series of randomly placed Teflon cylinders, and sent microwave signals scattering through them -- a little bit like rocks deflecting water waves in a puddle of water.

### ■ Absorbing the incoming waves

A waveguide placed on top with an antenna in its center was used to absorb the incoming waves. The researchers managed to get an absorption rate of approximately 99.8 percent of the signals they broadcast.

That high mark is only in tightly controlled conditions, though -- the team first measured the wave reflections as they came back in order to finely tune the central antenna to absorb them. Both the frequency of the signal and the absorption strength have to be carefully calibrated.

As a first attempt though, it's very promising, and the theoretical physics behind the project suggests it can be adapted to a range of other signals and applications. It could work for any scenario "in which waves need to be perfectly focused, routed or absorbed", write the researchers.

"Imagine, for example, that you could adjust a cell phone signal exactly the right way, so that it is perfectly absorbed by the antenna in your cell phone," says Rotter.

"Also in medicine, we often deal with the task of delivering wave energy to a very specific point -- such as shock waves shattering a kidney stone."

(Source: sciencealert.com)

## Polymer catheter coating kills infection-causing bacteria

Hospital-acquired infections are a serious problem, and the most common type of such infections occurs when catheters are inserted into blood vessels. A new coating, however, shows promise for killing bacteria at insertion sites, keeping them from establishing biofilm colonies on the catheters.

Developed at Rhode Island's Brown University, the coating was created by first dissolving polyurethane and concentrations of an antibacterial drug known as auranofin, then mixing them into a solvent solution. The resulting liquid was subsequently applied to a catheter, after which the solvent was evaporated away. This left a durable polymer coating behind, which can stretch by up to 500 percent without breaking.



In lab tests, catheters treated with the coating were placed in solutions and on glass plates, in which harmful methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) bacteria was present. For up to 26 days, the coating gradually released auranofin, inhibiting MRSA growth on the catheter -- this kept the bacteria from forming difficult-to-remove biofilms.

By contrast, when a traditional antibiotic was tested under the same conditions, it was unable to keep biofilms from forming. What's more, because auranofin isn't an antibiotic, there's no risk of its use leading to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Tests additionally indicate that the coating has no adverse effects on human blood or liver cells, although further research will be required before human trials can begin.

"Biofilms have really effective ways of evading antibiotics, which makes them thousands of times more difficult to treat in terms of the concentration of drug needed compared to planktonic (free-floating) bacteria," says Asst. Prof. Anita Shukla, corresponding author of a paper on the research. The "fact that these coatings are able to prevent biofilms from forming in the first place is really important."

(Source: newatlas.com)

## Gray wolves may lose endangered status and protections, biologists contend

Federal wildlife officials are proposing to strip endangered species protections from the gray wolf populations in the Lower 48 states, citing significant increases in their numbers across much of the nation.

Conservationists and biologists contend that some areas of the country, like the Adirondacks in New York and the southern Rocky Mountains, could be suitable habitats but wolf populations in those regions are vulnerable and still need protection to recover.

The gray wolf populations had dwindled to about 1,000 in the Lower 48 states when they received protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1975. But since their reintroduction to various regions, mostly in the West, the wolves' numbers have rebounded to about 5,000.

"Recovery of the gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is one of our nation's great conservation successes," the United States Fish and Wildlife Service said in a statement, "with the wolf joining other cherished species, such as the bald eagle, that have been brought back from the brink with the help of the ESA."

Bernhardt made the delisting proposal public on Wednesday in a speech to the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Denver, but it is not yet official. The proposed rule will be published in the Federal Register, with a period of time made available for public comment.

Even before Bernhardt was named as acting secretary of the Interior Department, administration officials and Republicans in Congress had begun efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act. And Bernhardt has come under fire for potential conflicts in a debate over protections for the smelt, a tiny fish at the center of one of the latest rounds of California's water wars.

Once considered only a varmint, wolves were extirpated from nearly all of their range through a campaign of bounty hunting, trapping, the killing of pups in the den with dynamite and even biological warfare as trappers introduced mange into wolf populations.

(Source: NYT)

## SpaceX crewed Dragon test flight finishes with perfect splashdown

SpaceX has now completed the first demonstration flight for the crewed version of its Dragon spacecraft. After launching atop a Falcon 9 rocket and traveling to the International Space Station (ISS) earlier this week, the spacecraft has now returned to Earth. The Demo-1 mission successfully splashed-down in the Atlantic Ocean on March 8th, moving the Commercial Crew Program one step closer to flying humans into space.

NASA has been forced to rely on Russian Soyuz capsules to get personnel to and from the ISS ever since the Space Shuttle retired in 2011. It launched the Commercial Crew Program in 2010 to support US companies in the development of new spacecraft to transport astronauts to and from space. Like most complex space projects, the Commercial Crew Program has experienced its fair share of delays. SpaceX, which launched the first Falcon 9 rockets just as the Commercial Crew Program began, is on-target to launch human passengers in just a few months.

The Dragon 2 capsule's return to Earth started at 2:30 AM EDT when it undocked from the station. The capsule fired its engines four times to aim the predetermined location in the Atlantic. The final burn lasted about 15 minutes, helping to slow the craft as it descended into the atmosphere.

If everything checks out, SpaceX will move on to an in-flight test of its launch abort system in June. That system should be able to yank the Dragon 2 capsule away from the Falcon 9 in the event of a problem with the rocket. A month later, SpaceX could fly its first astronauts to the ISS, Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley.

(Source: extremetech.com)

## Sewage reveals levels of antimicrobial resistance worldwide, researchers find

A comprehensive analysis of sewage collected in 74 cities in 60 countries has yielded the first, comparable global data, which show the levels and types of antimicrobial resistant bacteria that are present in mainly healthy people in these countries. The National Food Institute, Technical University of Denmark, headed the study, which was conducted by an international team of researchers.

In a metagenomics study, the researchers have mapped out all the DNA material in the sewage samples and found that according to antimicrobial resistance the world's countries fall within two groups. North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand generally have the lowest levels of antimicrobial resistance, while Asia, Africa and South America have the highest levels.

According to the researchers, the use of antimicrobials only explains a minor part of the occurrence of antimicrobial resistance in the various countries. Therefore, the researchers have searched for other factors that could be either drivers for or indicators of the occurrence of resistant bacteria.

### ■ Comprehensive data

In this work, they have used several comprehensive data sets from the World Bank, which e.g. have measured the countries' health status and stage of development.

The researchers' work shows that most of the variables, which are associated with the occurrence of antimicrobial



resistance in a country, are related to the sanitary conditions in the country and the population's general state of health.

"In the fight against antimicrobial resistance, our findings suggest that it would be a very effective strategy if concerted efforts were made to improve sanitary conditions in countries with high levels of antimicrobial resistance," Professor Frank Aarestrup from the National Food Institute and head of the study says.

Using the same data from the World Bank, the researchers have also predicted the levels of antimicrobial resistance in 259 countries/territories and they have drawn up a world

map of resistance in healthy populations. According to their estimates, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden have the lowest levels of resistance, whereas Tanzania, Vietnam and Nigeria have the highest levels.

According to the estimates, Denmark has the sixth lowest level of antimicrobial resistance.

### ■ Traditional methods of analysis


Contrary to data from traditional methods of analysis, raw data from metagenomics studies can be reused to examine other problems. The researchers from the sewage project are e.g. using data from the study to analyze the occurrence of other disease-causing microorganisms in the sewage.

The researchers will use the experience gained from the project to fulfill their overall ambition of developing a worldwide surveillance system that can continuously monitor the occurrence and spread of disease-causing microorganisms and antimicrobial resistance.

"Analyzing sewage can quickly and relatively cheaply show exactly which bacteria abound in an area--and collecting and analyzing sewage doesn't require ethical approval, as the material cannot be traced back to individuals. Both parameters help to make a surveillance system via sewage a viable option --also in developing countries," Professor Frank Aarestrup explains.


(Source: eurekalert.org)





**First Announcement**

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**Two- Stages (semi compressed) tender**  
**Subject of Tender: CASING 7"**



**National Iranian  
Drilling Company**

**N.I.O.C**  
**1397.6797**

**Tender descriptions:**

The Tender holder	Registration No. through nationalelectronic tendering system	Tender No. /Indent No.	Estimated value (Rial/Euro)
National Iranian Drilling Company	3195287	48-22-952/2022	100,802,000,000

**\* Qualitative evaluation of tenderers**

**Method**  
Based on minimum scoring (40) made in award criterion reflected in the tenderers pre-qualification forms.

- The tenderers who have more than four (4) active contracts with NIDC are not allowed to attend in this tender.
- The tenderers who have more than two (2) active contracts with same subject (exactly compliance with this subject) with NIDC are not allowed to attend in this tender.

**\* Purchasing & Submitting**

TenderDocumentDistributionyCompany	The distribution of the documents will be started one day after the publishing of second advertisement and ended on the following tenth day thereafter.
<p><b>Distribution Place</b></p> <p><b>Submitting Method</b></p>	<p>A) Hall No :316, 3thfloor, Foreign Procurement Dept. (DRILLING PROJECTS), National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN tel:06134146230  B) Jomhouri street , yaghami alley nyc, 8th building floor no : 04 room no 428 -sahran- iran -021- 66700249</p> <p>Submitting: one original Bank Fund Receipt in the amount of ..... Iranian Rials under account number 4001144004020491 (Shaha No. IR350100004001144004020491) in name of "NIDC incomes Centralized Fund" issued by I.R. Of Iran Central Bank. Submitting format: Request for the purpose of receiving Tender Documents.</p>
<p><b>DocumentsReceivingMethod</b></p> <p><b>Closing date</b></p>	<p>14 Days after the last time of Purchasing.</p>
<p><b>Address</b></p>	<p>H Hall NO.107, 1st floor, Tender committee, Operation building, National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN.  Tel: +98 61 34148580 +98 61 34148569</p>

**\* Tender Guarantee**

Value ofguarantee	3,517,000,000Rial/73,369Euro
<p><b>Type ofguarantee</b></p>	<p>* v Bank guarantees or guarantees issued by non-bank institutions that obtain activity license from the central bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran  * v Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt under account number 4001144006376636 (Shaha No. IR350100004001144006376636) in name of "NIDC saving account" by the central bank of Islamic Republic of Iran.  *NIDC saving account" by the central bank of Islamic Republic of Iran.</p>
<p><b>Durationof credit&amp;quotation</b></p>	<p>Tender Guarantee&amp; quotation should be valid for 90 days and extendible maximum for one time initial validity duration.</p>

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# Israel launches fresh Gaza airstrikes, targets Palestinian boat

Trump calls Democrats 'anti-Israel', 'anti-Jewish'

Israeli warplanes have conducted fresh air raids on the Gaza Strip in yet another act of aggression against the besieged Palestinian territory.

In a statement released on Saturday, the Israeli army said that its jets had struck several targets allegedly belonging to the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas in the southern and northern Gaza the night before.

Tel Aviv claimed that the aerial assault came "in response to the projectile that was launched from the Gaza Strip" as well as "balloons carrying explosive devices" and attempts to damage "security infrastructure" in the occupied territories.

Gaza security officials said the Israeli strikes had not caused any casualties.

The attacks, however, damaged Palestinian houses and farming land, according to Wafa news agency.

Also on Saturday, the Israeli navy opened fire at a fishing boat near off the northern Gaza. Palestinian media reported that the incident had no casualties.

Tel Aviv carries out regular attacks on the blockaded coastal sliver under the pretext of hitting positions belonging to Hamas, the movement which runs the Palestinian territory.

The coastal sliver has been under a crippling land, air and sea Israeli blockade since 2007 and witnessed three wars since 2008.

Gaza has also witnessed a fresh wave of tensions since March 30, which marked the start of "The Great March of Return" protests. So far, at least 253 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire during the weekly anti-occupation rallies in Gaza.

Friday's clashes near the Gaza fence left a Palestinian dead and at least 45 others injured.

The clashes in Gaza reached their peak on May 14, the eve of the 70th anniversary of Nakba Day, or the Day of Catastrophe, which coincided this year with Washington's relocation of its embassy from Tel Aviv to the occupied al-Quds (Jerusalem).

A recent report, commissioned by the United Nations Human Rights Council, said that Israeli forces may have perpetrated "war crimes" or "crimes against humanity" during the 2018 Gaza unrest.

**■ Israeli forces kill 1 Palestinian, wound 42 others in Gaza**

Meantime, Israeli forces have killed one Palestinian and injured at least 42 others during protests on the edge of the besieged



Gaza Strip.

Gaza's Health Ministry said a Palestinian had succumbed to the injuries he sustained during clashes east of Rafah City in southern Gaza on Friday.

The ministry added that 42 people, including women and children, had also been wounded during the 50th week of the "Great March of Return" protests.

Four medics and two journalists were among those injured, according to the report.

**■ Trump calls Democrats 'anti-Israel' and 'anti-Jewish'**

Elsewhere, the United States President Donald Trump has called Democrats "anti-Israel" and "anti-Jewish" after the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning bigotry and hate.

The U.S. House on Thursday passed the resolution after backlash from a number of factions across the Democratic Party forced changes to a bill that originally focused on anti-Semitism and remarks about Israel by a Muslim American congresswoman.

The resolution passed in the lower chamber of Congress overwhelmingly, 407 to 23, with all Democrats voting in favor including Representative Ilhan Omar herself, whose legitimate criticism of Israel has been deemed anti-Semitic by some colleagues and exposed deep fault lines among Democrats.

"As members of Congress and Americans we have a solemn, urgent responsibility to fight to end the scourge of bigotry, racism and hatred in our country," House Speaker

Nancy Pelosi said during the debate on the resolution.

Trump, before leaving the White House to tour tornado damage in Alabama on Friday, said he thought the vote was "disgraceful."

"The Democrats have become an anti-Israel party. They've become an anti-Jewish party," he told reporters.

"I thought yesterday's vote by the House was disgraceful," Trump said. "I thought that vote was a disgrace, and so does everybody else if you get an honest answer."

Omar, a newly elected Democrat Congresswoman from Minnesota, has sparked a firestorm on Capitol Hill over repeated criticisms of Israel and the powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington that exerts great influence in US politics.

She joined the two other Muslims in Congress, Rashida Tlaib and Andre Carson, in praising the measure's passage.

"It's the first time we have voted on a resolution condemning Anti-Muslim bigotry in our nation's history," they said, noting the worrying rise of extremism in America.

**■ Palestinians hold funeral for man killed during Gaza protest**

Separately, a funeral has been held for a Palestinian man shot dead during a protest at the fence separating the Gaza Strip from the Israeli-occupied territories.

The body of 23-year-old Tamer Arafat was carried through the streets of Khan Younis in southern Gaza.

Israeli troops shot and killed Taamer after

they opened fire on Palestinian protesters rallying near the fence.

**■ South Africa to go ahead with Israel embassy downgrade**

Moreover, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa says his country is planning to downgrade the status of its embassy in the occupied territories in response to Israel's violation of Palestinians' rights.

Speaking to the parliament in Cape Town, Ramaphosa said South African International Relations and Cooperation Minister Lindiwe Sisulu was working on implementing a decision by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party to lower diplomatic ties with Israel.

At the end of a conference in December 2017, the ANC decided to downgrade its diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv to a liaison office in an expression of "practical support" for the oppressed Palestinian people, warning Israel that it should pay the price for its "human rights abuses and violations of international law." Ramaphosa stressed the South African government's resolve to go ahead with the ANC's decision.

"The South African government remains seized with the modalities of downgrading the South African Embassy in Israel and we will communicate once the cabinet has fully finalized on this matter," he said.

"In implementing this conference resolution, we are mindful of South Africa's responsibility to continue engaging with all parties to the conflict to see where we would be able to provide assistance," he added.

The South African president further noted that the decision to downgrade the embassy in the occupied lands is driven by Israel's violations of the rights of the Palestinians and the regime's failure to enter negotiations on the so-called two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Last May, South Africa withdrew its ambassador to Tel Aviv in protest at Israel's deadly crackdown on anti-occupation rallies in the Gaza Strip.

South Africa established close ties with the Israeli regime during the apartheid era, but after the collapse of the discriminatory system, the African country began to lean towards Palestine.

Most South Africans have historically supported the Palestinians due to similarities between the Israeli occupation and South Africa's apartheid rule.

(Source: Press TV)

## Germany refuses to blacklist Hezbollah: report

**1→** Annen rejected US criticism that Berlin was doing too little to combat Iran's influence in the region and said his country's foreign policy remained focused on finding political solutions even in tough situations.



The British government last month designated the entire Hezbollah organization – both its political and military wings – as a terrorist entity. It had previously blacklisted Hezbollah's military apparatus as a "terrorist group."

Hezbollah strongly condemned the move, and described it as an insult to the Lebanese nation.

"The British government, in this decision, insulted the sentiments and the free will of the Lebanese people, who consider Hezbollah such a political and popular force that they granted it big representation in Parliament and Cabinet," Hezbollah said in a statement released after the UK's decision.

Hezbollah is strongly supported by the people of Lebanon and has a strong representation in the country's political process, especially after its victory in last year's elections, where it won over half of the parliamentary seats.

As a result of the victory, it later gained control over three of 30 ministries in the government led by Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, the largest number ever.

In remarks made earlier on Friday, Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah condemned the British government's decision to outlaw Hezbollah in its entirety, stating that some countries would follow suit.

"They list us as a terrorist organization because they have failed in their military confrontations and schemes, and are fearful of a new war. Hezbollah's willpower and might is getting stronger day by day indeed," he noted.

Britain has become increasingly angered by Hezbollah's role in an anti-militancy campaign in Syria, where London has for the past eight years supported terrorist groups opposed to the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Hezbollah has played a major role in helping Assad purge the Syrian territory from terrorist groups. The intervention, once criticized inside Lebanon, has helped the resistance movement increase its political clout as the group now controls three ministries, a first in the history of the Lebanese government.

The Israeli regime swiftly welcomed Britain's decision, with Israeli Security Minister Gilad Erdan saying in a tweet that the European Union, which unlike the United States has opposed designation of Hezbollah as terrorist entity, should follow suit.

(Source: Tasnim)

## Minister bills Israel enemy No. 1 of Pakistan

Pakistan's Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Ali Muhammad Khan says his country will never recognize Israel, which he said is the Pakistani nation's "number one enemy."

"We will never recognize Israel. Israel is Pakistan's number one enemy," said Khan in a public session in parliament on Thursday.

Khan's comments come in response to recent comments made by Pakistan's former military ruler, Pervez Musharraf.

Speaking at a news conference in the Emirati city of Dubai earlier, self-exiled Musharraf had called for strengthening of Islamabad's relations with Tel Aviv in a bid to counter Pakistan's arch-rival India.

Khan, however, ruled out any such scenario, reiterating that the Pakistani nation was united in its decision not to recognize Israel.

"The Pakistani people will strongly resist those who will even talk of having friendship with Israel," the minister stressed.

Khan's statements echoed earlier comments made by Pakistan's United Nations Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi rejecting any relations with Tel Aviv and highlighting her country's commitment to Palestine.

Senior Pakistani lawmaker and head of the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) Syed Khurshid Ahmed Shah has also recently said that Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan will not ever "make the mistake" of recognizing Israel.

Separately, last January, Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Faisal ruled out any prospect of opening ties with Israel and described Pakistan as being supportive of the rights of the Palestinian people.

Earlier this week, Pakistan's leading English-language newspaper Dawn cited a high-ranking government source as saying that Israel had assisted India in its recent confrontation with Pakistan following a car bombing that killed at least 40 Indian paramilitary forces in Indian-controlled Kashmir on February 14.



Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi also claimed this week that Islamabad had foiled an Indian plot assisted by Israel against the country.

(Source: agencies)

## Don't expect details from Mueller probe: senior U.S. Republican

Donald Trump's Justice Department is unlikely to grant Democrats in Congress access to underlying evidence from Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe of Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. election, a top congressional Republican said.

If Representative Doug Collins is right, Democratic-led congressional committees that have launched their own probes of Trump may be stuck with a Mueller investigation report that serves more as a general guidebook than a detailed roadmap of Russian interference and any Trump campaign collusion.

Democrats, who control the House of Representatives, want congressional investigators to have access to Mueller's grand jury evidence and other information from the probe, fearing that Attorney General William Barr could release only a summary of Mueller's report.

But Collins, the senior Republican on the House Judiciary Committee who met with Barr last week, told reporters that he expects any effort by Democrats to obtain such data from the Justice Department to end up in court, unless Mueller finds that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia. "They have never released it, and we don't expect that to happen again now," said Collins.

The Mueller report, Washington's most eagerly anticipated tome in years, is expected soon. Barr must decide what to do with it, a



major test for the new Justice Department chief.

Democrats want access to the underlying evidence because of concern that Barr could withhold any incriminating information about Trump. Justice Department policy does not allow a sitting president to be indicted, but also avoids releasing evidence of misconduct against individuals who have not been charged.

"We do not believe there's going to be collusion," Collins added. "There's no more indictments coming from this that we've seen so far."

He said he also does not expect the Mueller report to discuss related, ongoing federal probes, such as the one in the U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan. But Mueller could share national security-related classified information with Congress, he added.

Collins said his meeting with Barr showed that the two agree on what the law says about what can be released from the Mueller probe. "He said he wants to make as much available as he possibly can," Collins said. "But he's also going to be a very firm attorney general ... and he'll stay within the guidelines."

Justice Department officials and Demo-

cratic congressional committee staffers were not immediately available for comment.

Since May 2017, Mueller has been looking into interference by Russia in the presidential election that put Trump in the White House, whether Trump colluded with Moscow and whether he has since tried to obstruct subsequent investigations.

The Kremlin denies U.S. intelligence agencies' findings that it meddled in the election. Trump denies collusion and obstruction, often calling the Mueller probe a "witch hunt."

When Mueller reports to Barr, as required under law, Congress likely will not be notified immediately, Collins said.

On Monday, House Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler launched a broad investigation into possible obstruction of justice and corruption by Trump and his associates. The probe is aimed at a range of issues from possible campaign finance law violations to alleged contacts between the Trump campaign and Russians.

On Friday, Republicans countered by releasing the transcript of closed-door testimony by a career Justice Department official from 2018, which they said supports their contention of anti-Trump activities among department officials in 2016.

Collins said he intends to release more testimony in future, adding that the committee has about 20 transcripts in total.

(Source: Reuters)

## Erik Prince acknowledges 2016 Trump Tower meeting for first time

Erik Prince, the founder of the private American security company Blackwater, has admitted to meeting with members of the Trump campaign in August 2016 after, according to a public transcript, apparently failing to disclose the gathering during his testimony in front of the House Intelligence Committee last year.

When asked by Mehdi Hasan on Al Jazeera's Head to Head program about the August 3, 2016, Trump Tower meeting that reportedly took place between Prince, Donald Trump campaign officials, an Israeli social media specialist and an emissary for two Persian Gulf princes, the former Blackwater CEO (Chief Executive Officer) did not deny the meeting took place.

"We were there ... to talk about Iran policy," Prince said when pressed by Hasan.

According to the New York Times, that meeting was attended by Prince, Donald Trump Jr., George Nader, a former Blackwater employee and emissary for the crown princes of the Saudi regime and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Stephen Miller, then a top aide to the Trump campaign and currently a senior policy adviser to the president and Joel Zamel, whose company Psy-Group employed former Israeli intelligence operatives and specialized in social media manipulation and was reportedly contacted by Rick Gates, a top Trump campaign official, for proposals for social media manipulation to help Trump win the election.

Prince, however, apparently did not disclose information about the meeting when testifying before the House Intelligence Committee on November 30, 2017, according to a public transcript.

Prince testified under oath that he had "no official, or, really unofficial role" in the Trump campaign. He also told the House panel that he did not have any formal communications or contact with the campaign other than policy papers given to Steve Bannon, attending some fundraisers and a "yard sign".

When asked by Al Jazeera's Hasan about why he didn't then disclose the August 2016 Trump Tower meeting, Prince initially said he "disclosed any meetings, the very, very few" he had.

When pressed further by Hasan, Prince said, "I don't believe I was asked that question."

Prince later contradicted himself, saying he did tell the panel about the meeting. When asked to explain why it was not in the transcript, Prince said, "I don't know if they got the transcript wrong."

He later also said that "not all of the discussion that day was transcribed".

He added that he "certainly" remembers discussing the meeting with "investigators".

A staff member of the House Intelligence Committee told Al Jazeera that Prince was not asked about the August 3, 2016 meeting in Trump Tower during his testimony and any redactions that were made to that testimony were done to protect personally identifiable information.

(Source: Al Jazeera)



## Pochettino flattered by Real Madrid job links

Tottenham Hotspur coach Mauricio Pochettino says he would like to return to Spain in the future and said he welcomes his name being linked with the Real Madrid job as it speaks highly of his achievements with Spurs.

Santiago Solari's future as Real coach hangs in the balance after three defeats in a row which have effectively ended the club's chances of a trophy, culminating with a 4-1 loss to Ajax Amsterdam which knocked them out of the Champions League.

Although Solari will take charge of Madrid's La Liga game at Real Valladolid on Sunday, reports say he could be dismissed next week. "My relation with Spain will always be great and I would love to return one day and oversee a brand of football that could win games and excite people," Pochettino told Spanish television network RTVE in an interview on Friday.

"Of course I would come back to Spain, I'm always open to new experiences and projects."

Pochettino, who began his coaching career with Espanyol and has taken Spurs to the Champions League quarterfinals and into third place in the Premier League, is one of three names being mentioned in Spain as Madrid's next target.

Liverpool's Jurgen Klopp and Jose Mourinho, who was sacked by Manchester United in December and has coached at Real before, are said to be the club's other main choices for the role.

"I take it [Madrid's interest] as something positive, it means someone has noticed that we are doing something right," added the Argentine.

Pochettino also said he looked upon Tottenham striker Harry Kane as one of his children, but would not answer whether Real Madrid could take the England forward and him to Spain next season. "If I answer that my chairman [Daniel Levy] will get very angry with me for doing this interview. Or perhaps he won't mind," Pochettino said.

(Source: AFP)

## Fan arrested for confronting Rangers captain Tavernier

Rangers captain James Tavernier was confronted by a fan who was subsequently arrested in an ugly incident during a Scottish Premiership match at Hibernian on Friday which finished in a 1-1 draw.

The man tried to kick the ball away as Tavernier went over to the touchline to take a throw-in before the pair were involved in a scuffle. The fan was led away by police.

Hibernian chief executive Leeann Dempster told the BBC the 21-year-old supporter would be banned from Easter Road for life and that she would apologize personally to Tavernier.

"They've embarrassed this club tonight again, it's completely and utterly unacceptable," she said.

"What are we going to be talking about tomorrow? What is going to be on the back pages of the paper? What are you going to be asking me about? You're going to be asking me about this utter idiot."

The incident happened six days after Celtic's Scott Sinclair was almost hit by a glass bottle thrown from the crowd at Easter Road during the Glasgow club's Scottish Cup quarter-final win.

"There is a big debate, a healthy debate going on in the Scottish game. But I'm going to bring it back to personal responsibility," added Dempster. "Who thought it was okay to come in here with a glass bottle and throw it? Who thinks it's alright to jump over an advertising hoarding?"

"Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the people in here don't think it's okay and we ought to remember not to tarnish these guys as well. "This individual will be banned for life. He's in custody at the minute and that's where he should remain as far as I'm concerned.

(Source: Reuters)

## Maradona to become father of eight by recognizing three children in Cuba



Diego Maradona is to legally recognize three children he fathered in Cuba, his lawyer has said.

The children - who were born to two different women on the island - will officially make the Argentina football legend a father of eight.

For years, the 58-year-old refused to acknowledge any children other than those he had with ex-wife Claudia Villafane, who he divorced in 2003 after almost two decades of marriage.

Those were daughters Giannina, now 29, and Dalma, now 31. But he later recognized Diego Junior, 32, and Jana, 22, after court battles with their mothers, and has since had another child, six year-old Diego Fernando, with Veronica Ojeda.

Lawyer Matias Morla told Argentina TV station Channel 13 that Maradona would travel to Havana later this year to take paternity tests and formally recognize children six, seven and eight, who will be able to take his name.

Mr Morla said: "He is going to take care of what he has to do."

Following the news, Giannina joked on Instagram that her father "only needs three more to make 11" - enough to fill an entire football team.

The World Cup winner, who now coaches Mexican side Dorados de Sinaloa, will have to appear in court in Cuba, where he previously spent several years undergoing rehab for cocaine addiction.

(Source: Sky)

# U.S. women's soccer team members sue U.S. Soccer for gender discrimination

Members of the top-ranked US women's national soccer team on Friday -- about three months before the upcoming World Cup -- filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the US Soccer Federation citing gender discrimination, according to court documents.

Twenty-eight members of the team are listed as plaintiffs in the suit, which was filed in US District Court in California where the women are employed when they gather for national team camp.

The suit states that the women filed on behalf of themselves and all other similarly situated current and former women's national team players "who the USSF has subjected to its continuing policies and practices of gender discrimination."

The suit alleges that the federation discriminates by paying the women less than members of the men's national team "for substantially equal work and by denying them at least equal playing, training, and travel conditions; equal promotion of their games; equal support and development for their games; and other terms and conditions of employment equal to the MNT."

The US Women's National Team Players Association said it is not a party to the lawsuit, but supports the goal of eliminating gender-based discrimination at Chicago-based US Soccer, which governs the senior and youth national teams and recreational teams



and leagues.

It said progress has been made in the past few years to draw female players closer to their male counterparts.

"However, gaps remain," the union said adding it will fight for change through collective bargaining agreements.

The American women have had much more success on the pitch than their male counterparts, winning three World Cups and four Olympic gold medals.

The July 5, 2015, Women's World Cup title game between the US and Japan was the most watched soccer game in American TV history. The 2019 FIFA Women's World

Cup, which will be held in France, starts in June, and the US is one of the favorites to hoist the trophy. It is ranked No. 1 in the most recent FIFA rankings.

"Despite the fact that these female and male players are called upon to perform the same job responsibilities on their teams and participate in international competitions for their single common employer, the USSF, the female players have been consistently paid less money than their male counterparts," the lawsuit states. "This is true even though their performance has been superior to that of the male players -- with the female players, in contrast to male players, becoming world

champions."

This is not the first legal battle between the federation and members of the women's team. In March 2016, five players filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency that enforces equal pay law. Four of those players are plaintiffs in the new suit: Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe, Carli Lloyd and Becky Sauerbrunn.

Hope Solo, the former player who also was also party to the complaint, filed a lawsuit against US Soccer in August.

According to the latest suit, Morgan, Lloyd, Rapinoe and Sauerbrunn seek to represent all current or former players who were members of the women's national team at any time since February 4, 2015.

The complaint from 2016 was not resolved. However, in April 2017, it was announced that the US Women's National Team Players Association had struck a new labor deal with US Soccer, ratifying a new collective bargaining agreement through 2021.

The agreement covered the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup and the 2020 Olympics. When the deal was announced, CNN reported that in addition to better pay and bigger bonuses, the women received better hotel and travel accommodations and would be reimbursed for the years when their per diems were less than those of the men.

(Source: CNN)

## FIFA warns scandal-hit Oceania: Clean-up 'vital for survival'



FIFA warned the scandal-scarred Oceania Football Confederation on Saturday that it was on its "last opportunity" to clean up its act.

The message was personally delivered by Gianni Infantino, the president of world football's governing body, while in New Zealand to attend an OFC congress to elect a new president.

"It's vital that OFC turns the page. It's vital for the survival of football in this part of the world," Infantino told reporters, adding he had emphasised the point in his address to the congress.

The strict message came just days after FIFA slapped a three-month ban on OFC vice-president and FIFA Council member Lee Harmon following an investigation into the resale of tickets at last year's World Cup in Russia. The previous week, FIFA suspended former Oceania president David Chung for six years for corruption related to an NZ\$15 million (US\$10 million) OFC building project in Auckland.

They were the latest in a series of scandals to hit Oceania, which is made up largely of small Pacific island nations and is the smallest and weakest of FIFA's six continental confederations.

"If there is still somebody in Oceania who is involved in football in any capacity, who has not realised yet that the time of abusing football for personal gain is over, then we can really not help it any more," Infantino said.

"But I'm sure from what I've heard,

from what I've seen, that the message has definitely passed because this is really the last opportunity for Oceania."

The confederation has a long history of governance problems, although new president, Lambert Matlock of Vanuatu, said they had been addressed in "immense reforms" since Chung's resignation last year.

"We believe we are now on the right path to ensuring ethical breaches like those of the former president cannot be repeated," he said.

Chung's predecessor, Reynald Temarii of Tahiti, was forced out in 2010 after being implicated in a vote-selling scandal during an undercover newspaper sting.

In 2017, former Guam FA president Richard Lai, who served on FIFA's auditing body, was barred from football for life after admitting to accepting almost US\$1 million on kickbacks.

Another ex-OFC president, the late Charlie Dempsey of New Zealand, created an uproar in 2000 during the vote to award the 2006 World Cup.

He had been instructed by Oceania to vote for South Africa but abstained from the final ballot, effectively handing the 2006 tournament to Germany.

Reports in German media in 2015 alleged Dempsey, who died in 2008, had been paid US\$250,000 on the eve of the vote by a sports marketing firm linked to the German bid.

(Source: AFP)

## Sources close to Guardiola deny he has agreed to Juve move



Sources close to Pep Guardiola have vehemently denied claims he is set to take over at Juventus.

Reports in Italy on Friday sensationally claimed the Man City manager had verbally agreed to succeed Massimiliano Allegri at the end of season.

At a time when the Premier League champions are being investigated by Fifa, Uefa and the Premier League over allegations they breached Financial Fair Play regulations, Guardiola's own future has come into question.

City could face Champions League disqualification and a transfer ban if found guilty.

But sources close to Guardiola insist there is no truth to claims he is looking for an exit route.

The Catalan has offered his backing to the club's hierarchy amid a series of allegations regarding financial wrongdoing.

City also deny the claims, which were brought to light by whistle-blower Football Leaks.

Among the allegations are claims City over-inflated sponsorship deals to avoid FFP penalties.

Guardiola came out fighting on Friday - insisting his achievements at the Etihad would not be tarnished by the allegations.

"When you are fighting, people want to underestimate what you achieve," he said. "I'm not too much concerned or worried about what people say."

# Evra's astonishing response to Rothen remarks: I'll slap you in the face

Patrice Evra has launched an astonishing attack on former teammate Jerome Rothen after he was criticised for celebrating Manchester United's Champions League success and said: "Next time I see you, I'm going to slap you in the face."

United legend Evra danced and chanted with Paul Pogba after Marcus Rashford's injury time penalty dumped PSG out of the round of 16 in remarkable fashion, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men recovering from 2-0 down in the first leg to draw 3-3 on aggregate and go through on away goals.

And after Rothen accused Evra of a lack of respect, he posted a video on Instagram and said: "I was told Jerome said some nasty things about me. I didn't believe it but then I was shown the video. Your reward, next time I see you, I'm going to slap you in the face."

Evra, who played with Rothen at Monaco from 2002-04, added: "These aren't empty threats. You know we'll see each other eventually. I remember when L'Equipe gave you a rating of five and our other teammates got seven, since you were paranoid of the ratings, you would call the journalist



and ask: 'Why didn't you give me a seven?'

"Stop telling lies. Be careful, because we will cross roads eventually. I am sure we will."

Rothen, who reached the 2004 Champions League final with Evra, was furious after seeing his ex-teammate jubi-

lantly react to United's improbable success and said at the time: "Go celebrate in the United dressing room. Respect the people in the stadium, don't jump with joy and disrespect the people who pay to go to these games."

In an extraordinary defence of his celebrations on Wednesday night, Evra added: "The whole match there was a well-dressed guy in a suit, sitting behind me and Paul [Pogba] yelling 'Ici c'est Paris!' and constantly looking at me."

"I didn't say anything until after the game finished, when I recorded a video in which me and Paul were yelling 'Ici c'est Manchester!' as revenge."

"French press think I am an enemy of the state for rooting against PSG. Yellow jacket protests? My fault. PSG's elimination? My fault. The French press is too focused on my celebrations but I don't care."

United's 3-1 win over PSG on Wednesday meant they became the first team in the history of the European Cup to win a knockout tie after losing the home leg 2-0. The draw for the quarterfinals takes place on March 15.

(Source: ESPN)



# Iraq made life difficult for us, Marco Octvaio says

**S P O R T S** **TEHRAN** — Iran beach soccer national team Marco Octavio says the young Iraqi team made life difficult for them in their opener on Friday.

Team Melli defeated Iraq 5-2 in Group D of the 2019 AFC Beach Soccer Championship in Pattaya, Thailand.

Marco Octavio's men can now enjoy the luxury of a several days break, while Iraq have little choice but to take points from their second and final group stage match against Oman on Sunday.

"This is the first step, and we achieved. A young team with big inspiration like Iraq made some difficulties for our team but we proved our condition. Now our concentration is on our next match against Oman."

The Iraqi team have participated in the competition with their Iranian coach Karim Moghaddam.

"Before the match we expected a difficult game, because they are ranked second in the world and have more experience than Iraq in beach soccer," Moghaddam said. "They have very good players. Their



goalkeepers, forwards and defenders are some of the best in Asia. We tried to close the way for them. My players don't have much experience, and I want to think more and more about the next match. We gave a 100 percent today," he added. The second edition of the premier beach

soccer championship in Asia is 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 is being played in Pattaya from March 9-17, 2019.

## Azad University win Iranian Women's Basketball Premier League



**S P O R T S** **TEHRAN** — Azad University defeated Namino Isfahan to win the Iranian Women's Basketball Premier League.

Azad University defeated Namino Isfahan 58-54 in the final match at the Payambar-e Azam Hall in Tehran.

Goroh Bahman also defeated Hero 78-69 to finish in third place in the competition.

"Our goal was winning the title from the very first day. I am very pleased and I would like to thank my players for doing their best to win the title," Azad University coach Azadeh Zamanpour said.

"Azad University deserved to win the title because we trained hard to claim the title. Our team take advantage of young and motivated players and we can win more trophies in the future," she added.

## Persepolis winger Mehdi Torabi a doubt for Al Sadd match



**S P O R T S** **TEHRAN** — Persepolis winger Mehdi Torabi is a doubt for the crucial match against Al Sadd of Qatar football team due to a foot injury.

The international player suffered a right foot injury in the match against Nssaji in Iran Professional League on Friday and it is likely to keep him out of this game.

Torabi's absence will be a big blow for the last season's runners-up.

Persepolis will travel to Doha on Sunday to face the Qatari giants at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Group D of the AFC Champions League.

Persepolis were held to a 1-1 draw by Pakhtakor of Uzbekistan in their opener, while Al Sadd lost to Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia 2-0 in Jeddah.

## Matchday Two: West Asia Preview

Kuala Lumpur: The action continues as the 2019 AFC Champions League moves into Matchday Two with eight clashes in West Asia across Monday and Tuesday.

A repeat of last year's semi-final, a first-ever AFC Champions League match in Iraq and some heavyweight clashes are all on the cards this week as we enter matchday two of the competition's group stage.

### ■ Group A

Having come away from Isfahan with a valuable point at the start of their campaign, Al Zawraa host an AFC Champions League match in Iraq for the first time in history when they face group leaders Al Wasl on Monday.

The Emirati side had ended a 10-year winless run in the continental competition by defeating Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr 1-0 at Zabeel Stadium in matchday one and will look to cement their position at the top of the group with a win on the road.

The second Group A match-up sees Al Nassr host Islamic Republic of Iran's Zob Ahan in Dubai. The Saudi side's hopes of reaching the knock-out stages for the first time since 2010 suffered a dent after the matchday one defeat to Al Wasl.

In turn, Zob Ahan had reached the round of 16 twice in the past three seasons and will have been disappointed with getting just a draw at home against Al Zawraa in their opening match.

### ■ Al Zawraa (IRQ) vs Al Wasl (UAE)

Venue: Karbala Sport City Stadium, Karbala

### ■ Al Nassr (KSA) vs Zobahan (IRN)

Venue: Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai

### ■ Group B

A solid 2-0 win over UAE's Al Wahda gave PFC Lokomotiv the perfect foundation to build on, and they travel to Doha to face an Al Rayyan side reeling from the 5-1 defeat to Al Ittihad in matchday one.

The loss to Al Ittihad cost Bulent Uygun his job, with Al Rayyan announcing U23 coach Yuri de Souza has been



appointed as interim boss. The Brazilian starts his reign with the Lokomotiv tie on Monday.

Despite their domestic woes, Al Ittihad shone bright in Jose Luis Sierra's second match in charge. They travel to Abu Dhabi buoyed by a crucial win over Al Fayha in a relegation six-pointer in the Saudi Pro League on Friday.

Their hosts, Al Wahda, on the other side, have lost their last three matches in the AFC Champions League, having finished bottom of the group last year. They will look to finally get back on track on home soil ahead of a domestic cup semi-final next a few days later.

### ■ Al Rayyan (QAT) vs PFC Lokomotiv (UZB)

Venue: Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Doha

### ■ Al Wahda (UAE) vs Al Ittihad (KSA)

Venue: Al Nahyan Stadium, Abu Dhabi

### ■ Group C

Al Duhail emerged 3-0 triumphant against fellow 2018 quarter-finalists Esteghlal and Al Hilal came away with the three points from Al Ain following a 1-0 victory at Hazza bin Zayed Stadium in matchday one.

The two winners from the opening round of games clash at King Saudi University Stadium in Riyadh with

the winner taking early strides towards qualification to the knock-out stage.

Meanwhile, Al Ain travel to Tehran to face Esteghlal on the back of a poor run of form that saw them win just one of their last four games in all competitions. The UAE side are without suspended captain Ismail Ahmed who was sent-off in the previous match.

Coach Winfried Schafer opted to leave star striker Morteza Tabrizi on the bench against Al Duhail and his side were unable to find goals in the absence of the man who had netted 5 times in the 2018 AFC Champions League.

### ■ Esteghlal (IRN) vs Al Ain (UAE)

Venue: Azadi Stadium, Tehran

### ■ Al Hilal (KSA) vs Al Duhail (QAT)

Venue: King Saudi University Stadium, Riyadh

### ■ Group D

Tuesday sees a repeat of the 2018 semi-final as Al Sadd host Persepolis in matchday two. The Iranian side had won 1-0 in Doha and went on to reach the final following a 1-1 draw in the return leg.

This time around, both teams go into the fixture on the back of disappointing results; Al Sadd were beaten 2-0 by Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli in matchday one, while Persepolis could only muster a 1-1 draw at home against Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor.

Omar Al Somah's brace gave Al Ahli the top spot after the first round of games, and the Jeddah-based side are the group's only team yet to concede a goal.

Al Ahli's most recent trip to Uzbekistan ended in disappointment when they lost 2-1 to FC Nasaf in 2016. Pakhtakor, meanwhile, have not lost at home in the AFC Champions League since 2013.

### ■ Pakhtakor (UZB) vs Al Ahli (KSA)

Venue: Pakhtakor Central Stadium, Tashkent

### ■ Al Sadd (QAT) vs Persepolis (IRN)

Venue: Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Doha

(Source: the-afc)

## Iran crown champions of int'l karate competition

**IRNA** — The Iranian national team achieved championship in the first international karate tournament in Kerman.

This round of competitions were held in the boys section with more than 600 karate players, over 100 referees, coaches and supervisors in five Tatami, 2 Kata and Kumite fields in team, and individually at the Shahid Karegar Hall of Kerman

In the International Division, the Iranian national team stood on the first podium and Iraq, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan ranked second to fourth, respectively.

Also in the ranking category, Kerman Province came first, South Khorasan ranked second and Fars finished third, respectively in the competition.

National team-A were crowned the title in first round of Kerman international karate competitions in the girls' section.

The women's national team of Iran-A, Iran-C, Iran-B and Afghanistan were ranked first to fourth in the international section of the competition, respectively.

## Hadipour Iran's best taekwondoka in world

**IRNA** — After receiving the 4th rank in – 58 kg weight category, Iranian taekwondoka Armin Hadipour grabbed the best player title from the World Taekwondo.

The World Taekwondo has announced the latest ranking in which there were those related to the 3rd WT President's Cup which was held in Kish Island, southern Iran.

This is while, Farzan Ashourzade from Iran snatched the 10th place in – 58 kg category.

In – 68 kg weight category, Mir Hashem Hosseini with a gold medal ranked 12th.

The 3rd WT President's Cup was held in Kyorugi and Para-Taekwondo categories.

Some 361 athletes from Azerbaijan, US, Jordan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Tunisia, China, Russia, Syria, Sweden, Iraq, Oman, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Georgia, Lebanon, Poland and India participated at the event.



## Friendly: Iran women's futsal team beaten by Russia

**S P O R T S** **TEHRAN** — Iran's women's national futsal team lost to Russia in a friendly match on Saturday.

Fereshteh Karimi scored Iran's only goal in Tehran's Handball Hall. Iran had defeated the European bronze medal winner in the first friendly match 3-2 on Friday.

"We played well but conceded two goals in one minute for making mistake. However, I am satisfied with our performance against one of the strongest team in Europe," Iran coach Zivar Babaei said after the match.

Iran are preparing for the 2020 AFC Women's Futsal Championship.

## Brighton and Hove Albion edge Crystal Palace

Anthony Knockaert came up with a moment of individual brilliance to secure a 2-1 win for Brighton and Hove Albion at rivals Crystal Palace.

Glenn Murray's first half strike was cancelled out by Luka Milivojevic's penalty shortly after the break in the Premier League clash at Selhurst Park.

With neither side able to get a firm grip on the game, Knockaert fired into the top corner from 20 yards in what was his final kick of the game.

The visitors were lucky to still have all 11 players on the pitch after the opening seconds of the match. Anthony Knockaert made a rash challenge on Luka Milivojevic and was fortunate to receive just a yellow.

Glenn Murray was a late change for Brighton after Florin Andone pulled-up in the warm-up and the striker made the most of his opportunity.

He opened the scoring in the 19th minute when the Palace defense failed to deal with Lewis Dunk's long punt forward and the 35-year-old smashed the ball into the bottom corner from the right side of the area.

His 100th league goal for Brighton also represented his fourth from four games against old club Palace, whom he left in 2015, and more importantly gave an organized team low on confidence a lead to defend.

They did so with numbers and depth, limiting their rivals to only a blocked effort from Zaha after the ball was deflected into his path, Ryan tipping over Tomkins' header from the resulting corner, and a further deflected shot from James McArthur before half-time.

Palace were becoming reliant on another error to create the space they required to score and Davy Propper duly obliged with a clumsy challenge on Andros Townsend that gifted them the 50th-minute penalty from which Milivojevic equalised.

If scoring increased their intensity as Brighton continued to tire, they still struggled for creativity. Instead, from out of the blue in the 74th minute, Knockaert restored the visitors' lead.

Controlling a fine long pass from Dale Stephens on the right wing, the midfielder cut inside Patrick van Aanholt, carried possession to the edge of the area and then brilliantly curled an effort in off the inside of the far post to seal victory. (Source: Talksport.com)

## Analysis: New-look Al Duhail too good for Esteghlal

Rui Faria's first experience of the AFC Champions League went smoothly as the long-serving Jose Mourinho assistant steered Qatar's Al Duhail to a seamless 3-0 triumph over Esteghlal. Despite a slow start, Al Duhail got the job done in the second half as goals from Medhi Benatia, Youssef El Arabi and substitute Ali Aff ensured the absence of 2019 Asian Cup MVP Almoez Ali was not too keenly felt.

### ■ Retention first

Al Duhail set up in a 3-4-3 formation. With Karim Boudiaf and Luiz Junior occupying the two central midfield spots, flanked by Murad Naji and Sultan Al Brake who were deployed as wing-backs. Star signing Medhi Benatia anchored the three-man defence with Bassam Al Rawi and Ahmed Yasser either side of him.

Faria's philosophy centred around ball

retention first, as evidenced by the fact his back-three alongside Boudiaf and Junior all completed at least 84% of their +50 attempted passes.

Boudiaf was key to moving the ball from defence to midfield as the Qatari international exchanged 13 passes with Benatia, while Junior performed the task of linking midfield to attack. His top two passing combinations were with Boudiaf (gray) and Shoya Nakajima (blue) - 12 passes each.

### ■ Double role for Nakajima

The Qatari side's front three lined up with goal scorer Youssef El Arabi centrally, Edmilson on the right and Nakajima on the left. But with the wing-backs providing the width, the wide forwards had a different role to play.

While El Arabi looked for pockets of space in the final third and Edmilson kept centre-backs Pejman Montazeri and Mo-

ammed Daneshgar occupied, Nakajima dropped deep into midfield.

The Japanese international was at the heart of every attacking move, dribbling from deep and spraying through passes to unlock the defence. Despite nominally starting as a wide forward, Nakajima was the side's primary playmaker as his heatmap (above) shows.

### ■ Lonely night for Mensha

Nigerian striker Godwin Mensha crossed the Tehran divide, swapping Persepolis for Esteghlal in the summer, having scored three goals and assisted one to help his former club reach the 2018 AFC Champions League final.

His continental debut in the Blue shirt was not a happy one against Al Duhail's solid defence. Over the 2018 campaign Mensha averaged one shot every 29 minutes, but on Tuesday he



was restricted to one shot all night.

Having to play as the lone forward surrounded by three centre-back and with little support from Estaghlal's midfield, Mensha was so isolated up front that his 57th minute shot that ended up in row Z was one of only two touches in the opposition's box he mustered all game.

(Source: the-afc)



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When you put something in any pot, its capacity is reduced except the vessel of learning which expands with every addition.

Imam Ali (AS)

## Lisbon festival to screen two animations from Iran

**A R T** **TEHRAN** — Two Iranian animations will be competing in the Monstra Lisbon Animated Film Festival, which will be held in the Portuguese capital from March 20 to 31.



"Mr. Deer" by Mojtaba Musavi

Mojtaba Musavi's acclaimed movie "Mr. Deer" will be competing in the short film category, while "Starvation" by Zahra Rostampur will be screened in the student category, the organizers announced.

The story of the short movie "Mr. Deer" is set in a modern but ruined subway in an unknown time. People in this society have animal faces, they have forgotten humanity and ethics, and they do not avoid sins. Meanwhile, someone with a deer face is trying to reform the society.

"Starvation" tells the story of a hungry wolf who gets stuck in stereotypes about being the big bad wolf of the story. She has to flee when everybody accuses her of violence and murder. She faces the danger of getting killed.

## Azerbaijani ensemble to perform in Tehran

**A R T** **TEHRAN** — Azerbaijan Delnavazan Ensemble led by Iranian conductor Faramarz Garbrudi will give a concert at Tehran's Vahdat Hall on Wednesday.



Delnavazan Ensemble in an undated photo

The traditional Azerbaijani ensemble will perform a repertoire of mugham music, one of the folk musical compositions from Azerbaijan.

The ensemble features Elshan Mansurov and Farid Babayev on kamancheh, Shirzad Fataliyev on balaban, and Kamran Karimov on naqareh.

## Twenty-five Iranian movies offered at Fajr film market

**A R T** **TEHRAN** — A selection of 25 Iranian films will be offered to the representatives of international distributors and film festivals' directors at the Iranian Film Market on the sidelines of the 37th Fajr International Film Festival, the organizers announced on Saturday.

Screening rooms and a video library are provided for the film owners to introduce their films to the market participants.

The organizers haven't announced the lineup yet.

The 37th Fajr International Film Festival will be held in Tehran from April 18 to 26.

## Matei Visniec's play published in Persian

**CULTURE** **TEHRAN** — Romanian-French playwright and novelist Matei Visniec's play "Attention to the Old Ladies Eaten Away by Loneliness" has recently been published in Persian by Qoqnu Publications in Tehran.

Translated by Mohammad Madani, the 2004 book is a series of 15 short pieces divided into 3 parts that follow three spatial themes of borders, agoraphobia and desert.

# Image of the Year honors cartoonist Kambiz Derambakhsh

**A R T** **TEHRAN** — Kambiz Derambakhsh, a cartoonist famous for his quick and simple cartoons, was honored with a lifetime achievement award at the 16th edition of the Image of the Year Celebration on Friday.

The ceremony named "In Praise of Image" took place at the Iranian Artists Forum attended by a large number of veteran actors and cartoonists.

Speaking at the ceremony, the director of the celebration, Seifollah Samadian said that the organizers honor those who have added more credits to Iranian art.

"Derambakhsh is being honored for his 60 years of creating everlasting images. He is an artist who never liked to live outside his country. He is the one who keeps creating every single moment of his life," Samadian said at the ceremony.

The previous honorees were film critic Akbar Alami, and cinematographers Mahmud Kalari and Alireza Zarrindast.

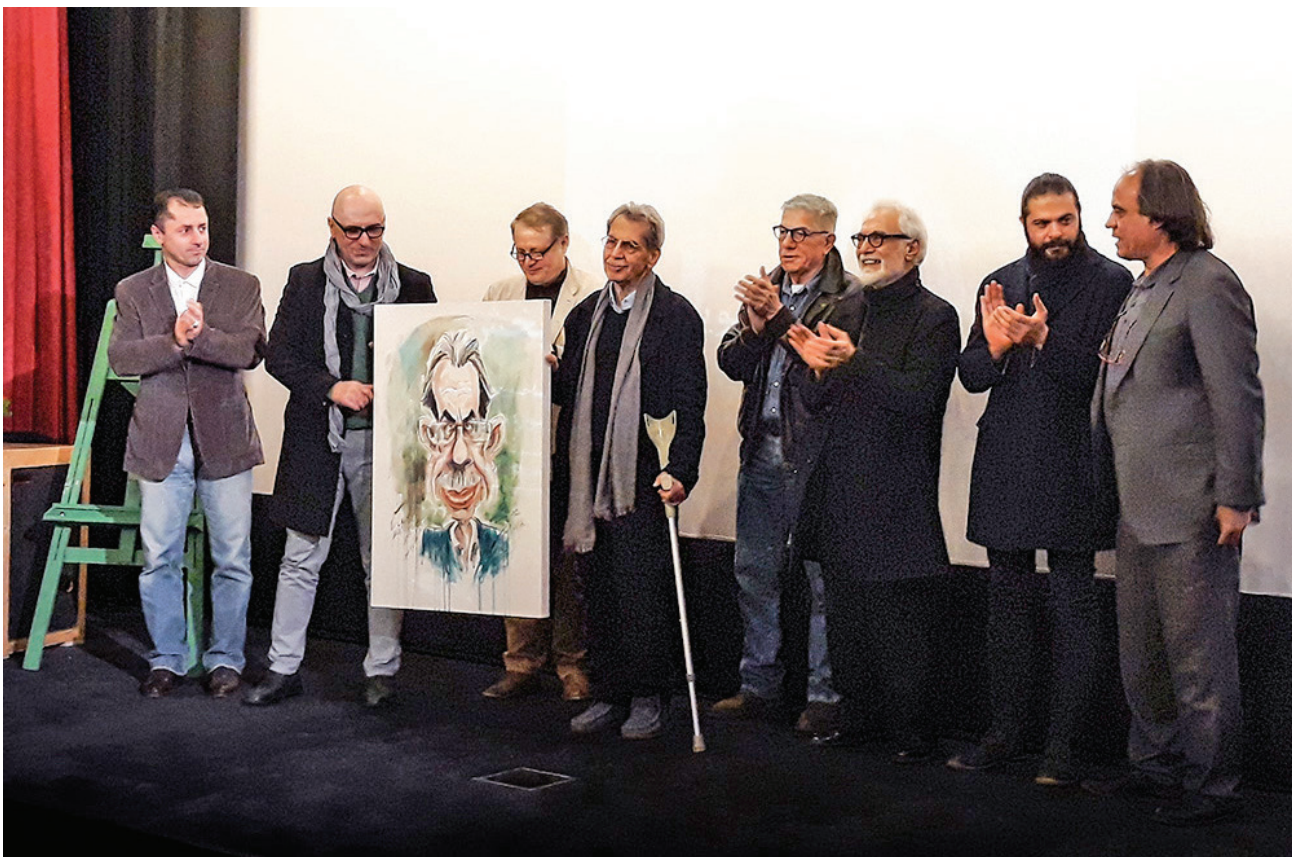
Tehran City Council member Ahmad Masjed- Jamei also called Derambakhsh an artist who has dedicated his time to the youth.

Journalist and film critic Hushang Golmakani, who used to be a coworker of Derambakhsh forty years ago, called the cartoonist the best.

"For me Derambakhsh is still the best cartoonist and graphic designer, as I still believe Zarrindast is the best cinematographer and Kaveh Golestan the best photographer," he said.

Derambakhsh received the plaque of honor and took photos with his friends at the end of the ceremony.

Known for his talent to find obscure themes for his creations, Derambakhsh, has



Cartoonist Kambiz Derambakhsh (4th Left) poses for a photo with a portrait of himself the cartoonist Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour painted during his honoring ceremony at the Image of the Year Celebration held at the Iranian Artists Forum on March 8, 2019.

worked as a cartoonist, a graphic designer and an illustrator for over 50 years.

Derambakhsh has won many awards at international competitions including

the grand prize of Istanbul competition in 1990, the grand prize at Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun competition in 1998 and the grand prize of a Polish anti-war caricature contest

in 2002.

The 76-year-old cartoonist has showcased his works in many exhibitions around the world.

## Fajr Intl. Festival of Visual Arts announces winners

**A R T** **TEHRAN** — The 11th Fajr International Festival of Visual Arts came to an end on Wednesday during a ceremony at Tehran's Vahat Hall attended by a number of cultural officials and artists.

The Golden Tooba Awards of the festival were presented to the Iranian artists in various sections including Parvin Heidarizadeh in illustration, Nima Elikai in calligraphy, Mitra Soltani in graphic designing, and Farid Honarvar in miniature.

Cartoonist Ehsan Ganji, sculptor Seyyed Fazel Mosalanejad, painter Rene Sahebqadam and photographer

Abed Jalil Puran were also among the honorees.

In addition, nine veteran artists were awarded Golden Toobas for their lifetime achievements.

Illustrator Parviz Egbali, painter Yaqub Emdadian, sculptor Qodratollah Memarian, land artist Ahmad Nadalian, cartoonist Seyyed Mohsen Nuri Najafi, calligrapher Ahmad Abdolrezai, photographer Jasem Ghazbanpur, miniaturist Mahin Afshanpur and Graphic designer Majid Baluch were the veteran honorees.

The 11th Fajr Festival of Visual Arts was held in Tehran in several categories from January 30 to March 6.



Veteran calligrapher Ahmad Abdolrezai holds Golden Tooba Award for his lifetime achievements during the closing ceremony of the 11th Fajr International Festival of Visual Arts at Tehran's Vahat Hall on March 6, 2019. (Honaronline/Ramona Mirian)

## Iranian nominees for 2019 Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava (BIB) announced

**A R T** **TEHRAN** — A number of 15 Iranian illustrators have been nominated for the 2019 Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava (BIB) in Slovakia, Iran's Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) has announced.

The jury including Farideh Shahbazi, Sahar Tarhandeh, Farshid Mesqali, Ali Buzari and Ali Hashemi Shahraki chose the top 15 out of 123 illustrators in a session held on Wednesday.

The illustrators have been picked for the illustrations of the books mostly published by Iranian publishers in Iran.

The nominees include Hassan Musavi for the illustration of the book "The Boxer" and Mitra Abdollahi for illustration of the book "An Umbrella of Petals" both by Tuti Publications, Atieh Markazi "Sinbad



This illustration by Iranian illustrator Narges Mohammadi from Ahmad Akbarpur's book "I Was a Deer" won a Golden Apple at the Biennial of Illustrations Bratislava in Slovakia in 2017.

Adventures" by Khorus Publications and Ghazaleh Bigdelu "An Umbrella with White Butterflies" by IIDCYA.

Other nominees are Nushin Safakhu "Seven Horses, Seven Colors" and Amir Shabanipur "Parrot and the Grocer" both published by the Institute for Research on the History of Children's Literature.

Maneli Manuchehri "Farewell Moon" by the Elmi Farhangi Publishing Company and Sara Miari "Mouse, and Cat and other Friends" by Neyestan Publications are also included.

Also included are Narges Mohammadi "Nokhodi and Div" by Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers from Japan and Hassan Amekan "Firebird" by Dolphin Publications from China.

The winners will be announced in October.

## In Between Worlds: Sebastian Plano's sweet, melancholic melodies on Iranian stage

By Marjohn Sheikhi

**TEHRAN (MNA)** — Argentinean multi-instrumentalist musician Sebastian Plano performed two shows for the Iranian audience on 7-8 March, taking them through a musical journey on the acoustic wings of somber cello and wheels of sweet electronic music.

I will probably be forever grateful to my discovery of the Icelandic musician Ólafur Arnalds and his somber neo-classical works, which carved a path for me on digital music services, paved with numerous suggestions of artists from all around the world, each unique in their own way, and yet sharing the same sweet vibe of melancholy and nostalgia, which I crave deeply with my battered, troubled soul.

Sebastian Plano was a late discovery, but definitely a case of 'love at first sound'. His 2018-released electro-acoustic single 'Purples' with those soothing and at the same time soul-searching melodies brought to life on a sampler, and then the bleeding, sober cries of the cello that wind tendrils of the purest emotions around your heart, was the first track I listened to that was composed by him, and I know many would agree that it is among his best and most powerful works.

Someone once aptly described the sound of violin at its best as a 'swan'; graceful, magnificent and elegant, with the serene feeling of being afloat in mid-air. Plano's magic on his cello makes the swan soar, and you feel like soaring with it. The sound of string instruments like violins and cellos can be grounding sometimes, if it bleeds too much and seeps in too deep, but Plano's cello melodies are liberating, at times even



Courtesy of RooBeRoo Mansion

therapeutic, as they soar gratefully in the air and raise you up with them. Such might be the subtle distinction between intimately tragic and aesthetically melancholic. And Plano's music abounds in the latter.

Still, his studio-recorded music can't hold a candle to his live performance. And I had the absolute pleasure to witness Plano's working miracles and weaving threads of magic on Friday in a small music hall in downtown Tehran.

Even though it is that time of the year in Iran when people are busy making the last minute arrangements for Nowruz holidays and making plans for New Year vacations, and despite the fact that the tickets for Plano's

shows were quite pricey for someone on a tight budget and who probably had little to no idea how the performance would turn out, the Argentinean-born multi-instrumentalist musician opened his act to an almost full house.

Born into a family of musicians, which he calls "a string quartet", with two on violins, one on viola, and he himself on the cello, and having been classically-trained, the now Berlin-based Sebastian Plano has the solid foundation of a musical savvy to know what he is doing, even at times when his melodies come too close to this side of erratic, because the end result is always pleasant to listen to and smooth, like fine silk draped over bumps and jagged lines.

His works have been compared to, and said to be inspired by, Ólafur Arnalds, Sigur Rós, Arvo Pärt, Nils Frahm and Max Richter. With the release of his debut album 'Arrhythmic Part of Hearts' in 2013, which already earned him international acclaim, Plano also became recognized as one of the pioneering artists who combine acoustic instruments and electronic music. His second album, 'Impetus' released in the same year, was mastered by Nils Frahm, and combines cello, piano, percussion and light electronics. His latest album, 'Verve', has just been released a few days ago, and a number of his CDs were available for purchase in the lobby of the music hall on Friday. The gorgeous 'Purples' is on this album, and the soothing track 'Verve' that somehow still holds true to its title, is the artist's most favorite.

Plano performed for two consecutive nights in Tehran, both of which receiving an enthusiastic response and standing ovation. The concert, called 'In Between Worlds', was organized by 'RooBeRoo Mansion', an artistic-cultural institute in the heart of Tehran, as the third installment of the 'Resonance Project', an initiative started by RooBeRoo Mansion in December 2016 with 'Autumn Light' concert by Ólafur Arnalds, followed by 'Blue Hour' concert by Italian composer Federico Albanese in 2018.

The project's goal is to give a spotlight to artists working in the neo-classical genre for the Iranian audience, and it has already gained a great number of loyal followers. The project will pick up the tradition in a few months by introducing more of the best of the neo-classical music to Iranian music lovers.