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Number 6352 • Tuesday December 3, 2019 • Azar 12, 1398 • Rabi' al-Thani 6, 1441 • Price 20,000 Rials • 12 Pages • www.iran-daily.com • newspaper.iran-daily.com

## Oman's top diplomat visits Iran after US trip



Zarif: Iran supports efforts to ease regional tensions

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif voiced support on Monday for de-escalation of tensions in the Persian Gulf region as he hosted his counterpart from traditional mediator Oman for talks in Tehran.

The visit by Oman's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi came a week after he held a meeting in Washington with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

It is the second time since late July that bin Alawi has been sent to Iran by the sultanate.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry said Zarif, in talks with bin Alawi, had "emphasized the necessity of reducing tensions in the region".

He also said Iran was ready to enter talks with all regional nations.

Zarif said Iran was serious about a plan - dubbed the Hormuz Peace Endeavour - which Tehran earlier put forward to reduce regional tensions.

President Hassan Rouhani announced the peace plan at the UN General Assembly in September, calling on Arab nations in the Persian Gulf, including Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia, to join it.

In a tweet, the Omani Foreign Ministry said that bin Alawi and Zarif had "discussed bilateral relations and regional issues".

According to Iran's Foreign Ministry, bin Alawi said the situation in the region

makes dialogue and mutual understanding necessary more than ever.

"In this regard, holding a comprehensive and inclusive conference with the participation of all countries with an interest can be helpful," he said.

The Omani minister's trip to Iran comes a week after he met Pompeo during an official visit to the United States.

The US State Department said at the time that Pompeo thanked him for "Oman's cooperation on security and counterterrorism issues".

Long-fraught relations between Tehran and Washington plunged to a new low last year when the US unilaterally withdrew from an international accord that gave Iran relief from sanctions in return for curbs on its nuclear program.

The arch-foes came to the brink of a military confrontation in June when Iran downed an American spy drone and US President Donald Trump ordered retaliatory strikes before canceling them at the last minute.

### Need for regional coalitions

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council also met with bin Akawi. Ali Shamkhani said the security of the Middle East can be guaranteed only through the establishment of regional coalitions free from any form of foreign interference.

"Only those coalitions, which are free

from influence and interference of foreigners, can solve problems, restore security [to the region] and last [for a long time]," Shamkhani said.

The Iranian official's remarks were clear reference to the failure of the United States in forming a so-called coalition comprising regional and extra-regional states to allegedly protect security of shipping in the Persian Gulf.

On November 7, the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), a US-led military coalition in the Persian Gulf, officially launched its operations supposedly seeking to protect shipping lanes near Iranian territorial waters.

The US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain announced that the IMSC, formerly known as Operational Sentinel, had opened its command center in the country.

Shamkhani said, "A country that is not committed to any of its obligations, whether in connection with Iran or in exchanges with other countries, cannot be trusted."

Those countries, which have played a leading role in creating tension and insecurity in the region and caused chaos by waging different wars and spreading terrorism, have never been after stability and security in the Persian Gulf and only seek to serve their own interests and plunder the region, the senior Iranian official warned.

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## EU's new foreign policy chief: Bloc trying to save JCPOA



International Desk

The European Union's new foreign policy chief said the bloc is doing anything to keep the Iran nuclear deal up and running.

Josep Borrell told Spain's leading newspaper El Pais on Sunday that the EU is "grasping at straws" in an effort to salvage the nuclear agreement because the bloc has "the greatest interest" in the survival of the pact.

Borrell, who took over from Federica Mogherini on December 1, urged Iran to stick to the unraveling deal.

"We call on the Iranian authorities to do what they can to keep the pact alive," he said.

The 72-year-old Spanish diplomat warned that it would be a "big mistake" if Iran does something that can "kill" the agreement.

"We tell our Iranian friends that it is best for them not to let the agreement die," he said.

The 2015 nuclear accord has been at risk since last year when the United States unilaterally withdrew from it and began reimposing sanctions on Iran.

The three European countries still party to the deal — Britain, France and Germany — as well as the EU have been trying to rescue it but their efforts have so far borne little fruit.

In May, one year after the US pullout, Iran began retaliating by scaling back its commitments to the deal — known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Since then, Iran has taken four steps back from the accord.

The latest was on November 4 when its engineers began feeding uranium hexafluoride gas into mothballed enrichment centrifuges at the underground Fordo plant south of Tehran.

Following the latest step, the European parties and the EU said Iran's decision to resume activities at Fordo was "inconsistent" with the nuclear deal and warned the JCPOA's dispute resolution mechanism could be triggered if Iran continued down that path.

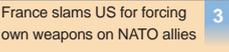
It covers various stages that could take several months to unfold, but the issue could eventually end up before the UN Security Council, which could decide to reimpose sanctions.

The five-nation commission overseeing the Iran nuclear deal is set to meet in Vienna on December 6, with fears growing that it could collapse. The joint commission is made up of the three European nations and the deal's other remaining parties, China and Russia.

Iran warned Sunday it will "seriously reconsider" its commitments to the UN atomic watchdog if European parties trigger the dispute mechanism.

"If they use the trigger (mechanism), Iran would be forced to seriously reconsider some of its commitments to" the International Atomic Energy Agency, said Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani.

AFP contributed to this story.



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## Putin, Xi launch 'historic' Russian gas pipeline to China

Russia and China on Monday launched a giant gas pipeline linking the countries for the first time, one of three major projects aimed at cementing Moscow's role as the world's top gas exporter.

Presiding by video link-up over an elaborate televised ceremony, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping hailed the "Power of Siberia" pipeline as a symbol of cooperation, AFP reported.

"Today is remarkable, a truly historic event not only for the global energy market, but first of all for us and for you, for Russia and China," Putin said.

Xi said the project served as a model of cooperation.

"China-Russia relations are entering a new era," Xi said. "Everyone worked hard."

The ceremony featured hard-hatted gas workers and videos showing the pipeline's difficult path from remote areas of eastern Siberia to Blagoveshchensk on the Chinese border.

Workers burst into applause and celebratory music played as the CEO of Russian gas giant Gazprom, Alexei Miller, speaking from the Amur region, ordered a valve opened for the gas to flow across the border.

The 3,000-kilometre (1,850-mile) pipeline — which Putin has called "the world's biggest construction project" — will supply China with 38 billion cubic meters (1.3 trillion cubic feet) of gas annually when fully operational in 2025.

Russia and China signed the 30-year, \$400 billion construction deal in 2014 — Gazprom's biggest ever contract.

The pipeline is part of Russia efforts to develop ties with Asia — in particular top energy importer China — amid longstanding tensions with the West.

Gazprom stressed that the pipeline ran through "swampy, mountainous, seismically active, permafrost and rocky areas with extreme environmental conditions".

Temperatures along the route plunge to below minus 60 degrees Celsius in Yakutia and below minus 40 C in the Russian Far East's Amur Region.

Work has also been completed on the first road bridge between Russia and China, further linking the two neighbors.

The bridge, which is to open next year, will connect the city of Blagoveshchensk and the northern Chinese city of Heihe.

## VP: Iran still selling oil despite US sanctions



Iran is still selling its oil despite US sanctions on the country's exports, First Vice President Es'hag Jahanjiri said on Monday, adding that Washington's "maximum pressure" on Tehran has failed.

"Despite America's pressure ... and its imposed sanctions on our oil exports, we still continue to sell our oil by using other means ... when even friendly countries have stopped purchasing our crude fearing America's penalties," Jahanjiri said.

Relations between the two foes reached crisis point last year after US President Donald Trump abandoned a 2015 pact between Iran and world powers under which Tehran accepted curbs to its nuclear program in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Washington has reimposed sanctions aimed at halting all Iranian oil exports, saying it seeks to force Iran to negotiate to reach a wider deal. Tehran has rejected talks unless Washington returns to the nuclear deal and lifts all sanctions.

"They have failed to bring our oil exports to zero as planned," Jahanjiri said.

He hailed Iran's petrochemical and metal industries for overcoming US sanctions and continuing exporting their commodities.

"Iran's economy stood firm on its own feet with two years of resistance and the efforts of its exporters and got over the psychological shocks the Americans gave to the country through their economic war," Jahanjiri said.

Jahanjiri, however, warned against threats posed by the US and its regional allies and called for unity.

"Today, Iran is in danger. The Americans, the Saudis and the Zionists (Israelis) are seeking to bring down Iran. The only way to deal with them is unity," he said.

"We need national solidarity more than ever so that the country can pass through this difficult time." Reuters contributed to this story.