

**Opening Remarks by the UN Resident Coordinator to the Islamic Republic of Iran**  
**Special Panel on International Cooperation in Sustainable Management of the**  
**Zagros Forests,**

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Honorable **Dr. Kazem Gharibabadi**, Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs;

Honorable **Mr. Ali Teymouri**, Deputy Minister and Head of the Natural Resources and Watershed Management Organization;

Mr. **Hamid Hamedani**, Deputy for Technical Infrastructure and Production Affairs of Plan and Budget Organization of the I.R. of Iran; and

Mr. **Gholam Hossein Darzi**, Director-General for International Environmental and Sustainable Development Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Excellencies, distinguished participants, **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure for UN-Iran **to partner with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs** in organising this Special Panel on “International Cooperation, Lessons Learned and Best Practices in Sustainable Management of Zagros Forests” and I warmly welcome you on this occasion.

Just a few weeks ago, I traveled by train from Doroud in Lorestan to Andimeshk in Khuzestan. That journey left a lasting impression on me. We moved from snow-fed fertile agricultural plains into steep mountain valleys covered with oak forests. As we exited the mountains in the South, it became clear that the rivers born in these mountains—the Karun, the Dez—were the same rivers that once nourished some of the world’s earliest civilizations. These mountains are not just scenic—they are foundational to Iran’s history, culture, and future.

This region is also believed to be one of the **cradles of agriculture and domestication of animals and plants**. The environmental richness of the Zagros enabled early human societies to develop sustainable ways of life—ways that eventually spread throughout West Asia and Europe. This makes the Zagros not just a national treasure but a global one—a living link to humanity’s shared past. Its

preservation is not only about preserving Iran's ecosystems. It is about safeguarding humanity's shared cultural and historical heritage.

### **The Importance of the Zagros Forests**

The Zagros forests stretch across nearly 6 million hectares, covering around 40% of Iran's total forest area. In a country where large parts of the land are arid or semi-arid, this forest cover is **not only ecologically important**—it is essential for human survival. These forests regulate water systems, prevent soil erosion, and offer livelihoods to millions, from nomadic herders to downstream farmers. They are also biodiversity hotspots, home to more than 1,000 plant species and rare wildlife such as the Persian leopard and brown bear.

But this irreplaceable ecosystem is today **under increasing pressure**. The area under forest cover has **declined dramatically** over the past 80 years due to illegal logging, overgrazing, and land conversion. And now, climate change is amplifying those threats—causing prolonged droughts, more intense forest fires, and growing vulnerability to pests. Without urgent action, we risk losing not only the Zagros forests but the life systems they support.

What makes the Zagros even more critical is its **role in regional water security**. The forests form the hydrological backbone of Iran's western mountain ranges, feeding major rivers like the Karun and contributing to the Tigris basin. In recent years, **declining rainfall** and upstream degradation have already affected downstream communities, both urban and rural. The loss of this forest cover would mean even more stress on agriculture, food systems, and national water availability.

I returned last weekend to the Zagros to **better understand the interaction between nature and humans** (thanks to my friends from Nomad Tours) – I would like to show just six pictures to demonstrate some of the aspects that may be of importance for our discussions today:

- The Zagros is not only a natural, but also a cultural landscape for millennia – salt mining in the middle of rugged terrain
- The forests– and its importance in a fragile ecosystem
- Including for water sources

- The Bakhtiari nomads and the forests – overgrazing is a huge issue, hence conservation needs to be owned by the locals. Build on nomadic lifestyle
- One way is to diversify incomes - Great potential for ecotourism – for example Sar Agha Seyyed village
- Good to see that development reaches the most remote areas – here a school is built in a winter village

### **Acknowledging the Work of UNDP and the Government of Iran**

Fortunately, there is a **strong foundation** we can build upon. Between 2005 and 2017, UNDP and the Government of Iran implemented the "Conservation of Biodiversity in the Central Zagros Landscape" project, with support from the Global Environment Facility. This was a **pioneering initiative**—not only for its technical outcomes but also for its **inclusive approach**. Ministries, local authorities, and communities all played an active role in shaping conservation strategies and integrating them into development planning.

The project helped establish **sustainable, replicable models** for managing natural resources and supporting local livelihoods. It also strengthened institutional frameworks for **mainstreaming biodiversity** into national policies. While we currently await decisions on newer proposals under GEF-7 and GEF-8, the work accomplished in the Central Zagros by UNDP and national partners in the recent past stands as a clear example of what can be done when partnerships are strong and goals are shared. We must not let that momentum fade.

This approach, often referred to as "biodiversity mainstreaming," involved **integrating conservation into the policies** and daily work of key sectors such as agriculture, water, energy, tourism, and infrastructure. The result was not only better environmental outcomes but also more **sustainable development practices** at the landscape level. While similar efforts have been planned in Ilam Province and under EU-supported initiatives, several of these are currently on hold—highlighting the need for **continued political support** and predictable funding streams. The UN's conservation model has proven successful in Central Zagros now deserves to be scaled and adapted across the Zagros region.

### **The Way Forward**

As we look ahead, several challenges require immediate attention. Environmental financing needs to be a priority for all stakeholders. While the government must lead by **increasing domestic investment**, we must also acknowledge that **nature is a global public good**. The forests of Iran help stabilize regional climates, store carbon, and preserve global biodiversity. For this reason, **international cooperation**—through mechanisms like the GEF, the Green Climate Fund, and bilateral partnerships—must be strengthened and enhanced.

The population – **Bakhtiari nomads and other communities** must be in the center of conservation efforts. The goal should be to **convey ownership** over conservation and restoration efforts to local communities, taking into account their lifestyle and redirecting problematic practices (such as overgrazing and unsustainable land use) **through new incentives** and **diversification of income** (ecotourism) – as such returning to sustainable models of coexistence of humans with nature.

We need to look at a **system approach**, which requires the cooperation of several Ministries and actors – combining environment conservation, restoration, and socio-economic development, taking into account **traditional knowledge** as well as working with **incentives and value chains**. Transfer of knowledge from international good practices will further accelerate results.

Lastly, we must support the many **environmental champions** in Iran. Thousands of professionals and civil society actors have the skills and passion to make a difference, but too often they lack funding, or recognition. Enabling their full participation in conservation efforts is important for sustainable outcomes.

## **Closing**

In closing, I urge everyone here today to treat this meeting **not just as a technical discussion** but as a reflection on our shared responsibility towards the Zagros ecosystem. The Zagros forests are ancient, vital, and deeply connected to both Iran's identity and its future development. They **must be protected**—not just for their beauty, but for the life they sustain, the history they carry, and the stability they can help secure for our future. I look forward to the ideas that are bound to emerge in today's discussion.

Thank you.