

# PORTUGAL DIPLOMÁTICO



**Visit of the President of the Regional  
Council of Île-de-France to Lisbon  
Elections in Japan  
Interview with Hélder Sousa Silva**

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# Contents

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## NATIONAL NEWS

Month of MFA..... page 2

Visit of the President of the Regional Council of Île-de-France to Lisbon's  
Metropolitan Area..... page 4

**Interview with Helder Sousa Silva..... page 6**

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

General Elections in Costa Rica..... page 15

Elections in Japan: Popularity Turned into Consolidation..... page 18

Elections in Thailand..... page 22

Munich Security Conference 2026 reaffirms commitment to collective  
security amid global tensions..... page 24

African Union Summit..... page 28

## CONFLICT CLARIFIED

US-Iran Conflict..... page 31

# Month of MFA

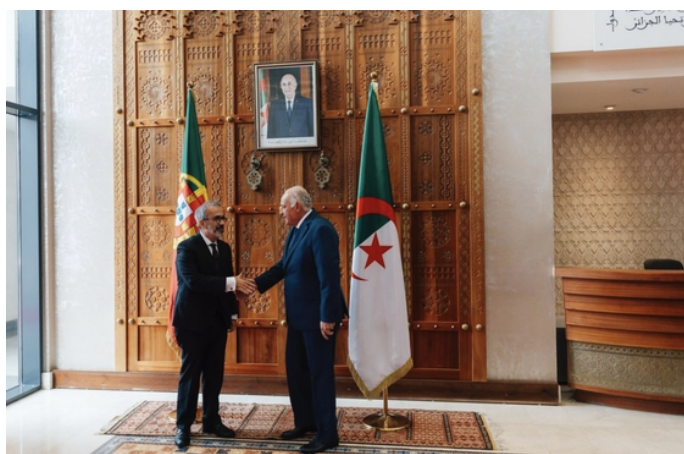
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By Bruno Oliveira

This February, we followed the various bilateral meetings held by the Minister of State and Foreign Affairs, Paulo Rangel, in a wide range of contexts, including the Munich Security Conference, in which he participated, as well as the MFA's official visit to Lithuania.

## Meeting with Algerian counterpart

At the beginning of the month, Paulo Rangel travelled to the Algerian capital, Algiers, for a meeting with his Maghreb counterpart, Ahmed Attaf. After a meeting with Portuguese companies, the Portuguese Foreign Minister met with his Algerian counterpart to discuss political and economic cooperation between the two countries, but the situation in the Middle East and the Sahel region was also addressed.



*Meeting between Paulo Rangel (left) and Ahmed Attaf (right) (source: MNE)*

## Munich Security Conference

In addition to his participation in the panel discussion “Western Hemisfever: security in the Americas”, Paulo Rangel also took part in several bilateral meetings. With the Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, Filip Ivanović, he discussed the two countries’ participation in NATO and multilateralism in the 21st century. The situation in Gaza and the West Bank, respect for international law and support for the two-state solution were some of the topics discussed between Paulo Rangel and his Palestinian counterpart, Varsen Aghabekian Shahin. With the Foreign Minister of the Maldives, Abdulla Khaleel, the conversation focused on bilateral relations, the defence of multilateralism and Portugal's support for small island developing states (SIDS). Finally, Paulo Rangel also met with his Omani counterpart, Badr bin Hamad, to discuss relations between the two countries, which are celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations, as well as Oman's role as a mediator in international negotiations in the region.



*Meeting between Paulo Rangel (left) and Badr bin Hamad (right) (source: MNE)*

### **Official visit to Lithuania**

On 16 February, Lithuania celebrated Independence Day, which was attended by the Portuguese Foreign Minister during his official visit to the Baltic country.

The day began with a visit to the Lithuanian border with Belarus, where the Minister was able to learn first-hand about the Schengen protection system. Next, in Vilnius, Paulo Rangel took part in the celebrations for Lithuanian National Day, together with the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, the European Commissioner for Defence, Andrius Kubilius, and the Lithuanian Foreign Minister, Kęstutis Budrys.

After the ceremony, Paulo Rangel had lunch with his Lithuanian counterpart and then visited the Lithuanian Parliament, where he attended a meeting with the Chair of the Committee on European Affairs. In the afternoon, the Portuguese Minister visited the Museum of the Occupation and Freedom Fighters, before ending the day with a concert commemorating the restoration of independence.



*Andrius Kubilius (left), Kęstutis Budrys (centre) and Paulo Rangel (right) at the ceremony commemorating Lithuanian National Day (source: MNE)*

# Visit of the President of the Regional Council of Île-de-France to Lisbon's Metropolitan Area

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By Maria Neves

Between February 1 and 4, 2026, Valérie Pécresse, President of the Île-de-France Region, carried out an official visit to Lisbon, during which a new metropolitan cooperation agreement was signed.

## **Context of the Île-de-France Region**

The Île-de-France Region is an administrative region located in north-central France, composed of eight sub-regions. It represents one fifth of the French population and is one of the country's most business-dense areas.

Politically, this region enjoys relative autonomy and has its own budget. It is governed by an elected Regional Council, which has the legal authority to establish decentralized cooperation agreements with other European regions and metropolitan areas.

## **Context of bilateral relations between the metropolitan areas**

In 2020, the Lisbon Metropolitan Area and the Île-de-France Region formalized their first partnership through a Cooperation Agreement that defined five sectoral areas of mutual development: industry, economic development, education, tourism, and environment.

On February 2, 2026, Carlos Moedas and Valérie Pécresse signed, in Lisbon, a new cooperation protocol for the 2026–2029 period, called the "Roadmap." Among the main areas of cooperation, innovation and economic relations stand out, focusing on trade exchanges, cross-investment, and synergies between startups and companies. Another strategic priority centers on metropolitan mobility policies, particularly intermodality and the digitalization of ticketing systems.

Tourism, culture, and education also constitute a key pillar, promoting stronger links between universities, joint applications for European funding, and the organization of events, festivals, and exhibitions.

Both regions also committed to continuing the 2022 Climate Protocol, with the aim of mitigating and adapting to climate change while protecting urban biodiversity.



*Valérie Pécresse and Carlos Moedas sign a cooperation agreement between the two metropolitan regions (photo: CML)*

the subnational level, highlighting a more decentralized world capable of listening and responding more effectively to regional challenges.

### **Chronology of the visit: February 1-4**

During the official visit of the Île-de-France delegation, several high-level political meetings, economic sessions, and institutional visits took place.

On February 3, 2026, Valérie Pécresse was received in the Parliament's Reception Room by José Pedro Aguiar-Branco, President of the Assembly of the Republic, and Carlos Alberto Gonçalves, President of the Portugal-France Parliamentary Friendship Group.

The French delegation also met with Paulo Macedo, CEO of Caixa Geral de Depósitos, and Miguel Stilwell d'Andrade, CEO of EDP.

This visit reflects a trend toward strengthening Franco-Portuguese relations at

# Interview with Hélder Sousa Silva

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*Our guest for the February edition is Hélder Sousa Silva, Member of the European Parliament since 2024, where he is a member of the European People's Party (EPP) Group. His political career began in 2011, when he was elected Member of Parliament for the PSD. In 2013, he stood as a candidate in the local elections and served as Mayor of Mafra until 2024. In the European Parliament, Hélder Sousa Silva is a full member of the Committee on Budgets and a substitute member of the Committees on Culture and Education and on Security and Defence. He is also Chair of the Delegation for Relations with the Federative Republic of Brazil and a member of the Delegation for Relations with Mercosur. Interview conducted by Bruno Oliveira.*



*Hélder Sousa Silva*

**First of all, I would like to thank you for accepting this invitation and I would also like to know about your political career until you were elected Member of the European Parliament.**

I entered politics at around the age of 40. I was invited to join a list to become a councillor in 2005 in the Mafra City Council, which is the municipality where I was born, and I accepted that invitation. Between 2005 and 2011, I was elected and served as a councillor in the Mafra City Council. In 2011, Dr. Pedro Passos Coelho ran for Prime Minister at a critical time with the Troika here, and he invited me to be part of the list of MEPs for Lisbon. I accepted, saying that I would like to be a candidate for Mafra in 2013, because my local government experience is very strong. However, I also contributed to the Assembly of the Republic and the Government as long as I could. I was elected in 2011 and served as a Member of Parliament until 2013. In 2013, in the local elections, I ran again, this time for Mayor, which I won three times, in 2013, 2017 and 2021, until 2024, when I was Mayor of Mafra. As it was my last term, I could no longer run for office. In 2024, elections for the European Parliament were held, and I was invited to join the list and was elected. I have been here for about a year and a half, to date as a Member of the European Parliament, which has been a fantastic experience.

**One of the essential parts is your work on parliamentary committees, as you are a member of the Committees on Budgets, Education and Culture, and Security and Defence, serving as a substitute on the latter two and as a full member on the former. In summary, how would you describe your experience**

### **in each of these committees and what has been done?**

I would say that it is very intense work, with the responsibility of defending the best interests of European citizens in general, but particularly the Portuguese. And so, in the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets, it is the committee, I may be biased in saying this, but it is the heaviest, most important committee, where the discussion and approval of the Annual Budgets and the Multiannual Budget, which is the multiannual financial framework, which is happening now, are two fundamental pieces of what is the money that will drive the great machine that is the European Union in its different bodies. Therefore, ensuring that expenditure is aligned with political priorities, as well as negotiating between the Council, Parliament and the Commission, in what we call trilogues, these fundamental pieces that are the Annual Budget and the multiannual financial framework. However, other matters also take place in this committee, but these are the two main ones.

Then, on the issue of the Security and Defence Committee, which was a subcommittee that, during this term, became a full committee, all matters related to European security and defence, which, as we know, has been somewhat neglected in recent decades and which we have delegated, if you will, our security and defence to third parties within NATO, but mainly to the United States, and that is why we are currently working consistently to strengthen defence industries at European level, to ensure the mobility of all security and defence forces within the Community and to acquire equipment under programmes that we are launching, such as the SAFE programme, for example, and a very important package is also currently being defined, of around €8 billion for Portugal, but to re-equip in terms of security and defence. Therefore, on the issue of security and defence, we are exploring new paths, a new stance for the European Union.

Finally, the Committee on Culture and Education, which covers the areas of culture, education, youth, sport and audiovisual media, is also a very interesting committee, because culture, if you like, is the backbone that sustains and underpins this union of 27 Member States. And so, as a member of this committee, areas such as the Erasmus+ programme, an area to which we have dedicated ourselves, and now also areas such as the issue of online piracy, which also has a lot to do with audiovisual media and copyright and justice, if you will, and also with security, because it has also become a security issue, since many cybercriminals hide behind networks, some of which have audiovisual facilities, but then they hack into personal accounts, which ultimately also becomes a security problem, the issue of audiovisual piracy. So these are two examples where I have been working, and I am now working hard, linking the budget to culture, as a culture editor for the multiannual financial framework. And so I am also trying to make the most of this by securing funding for culture.

cultura, como redator na cultura para a área do quadro financeiro plurianual. E, por isso, estou também a tentar tirar o melhor partido disto, garantindo o financiamento para a área da cultura.

**With regard to the multiannual financial framework, how are these negotiations being handled in the Parliamentary Committee on Budgets?**

It is a long process, because the multiannual financial framework is also a framework for seven years, from 2028 to 2034. The Committee on Budgets therefore always seeks to defend the vision of Europeans and works on the basis of a proposal from the Commission. We do not make the initial proposal, but we work on the basis of the Commission's proposal and always seek to add value to that proposal, defending citizens and the best that has been done in Europe, as I said, the main programmes, the Horizon Europe programme, the Erasmus Programme, the issue of cohesion policy, the common agricultural policy, the European Competitiveness Programme, now called the European Competitiveness Fund, and the European diplomacy programme in the four corners of the world, which is Global Europe, through the financing of projects in third countries, which is a good example. We have to balance revenue and expenditure, because we also know that the European Union's own funds and resources are quite limited. They are quite limited now, not least because we are repaying the PRR, which is Next Generation EU, and we are currently starting to pay not only interest but also capital and interest. And so this burden that we inherited from previous mandates, and which was a good burden, which is the issue of the PRR, because it served a purpose in the post-Covid period. But now the loans have to be repaid, and in that sense we have a major challenge, which is to find new own resources so that we can also respond without additional cuts to the new challenges facing the European Union, such as competitiveness, security and defence, which are two good examples of areas where more money is needed, and so we have a major challenge in finding it.

In the current legislature, the powers of the Committee on Budgets have been strengthened, and it is now responsible for assessing the budgetary impact of all legislative proposals submitted by the Commission to Parliament for approval, determining whether or not they are compatible with the Multiannual Financial Framework and with the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union. I have been rapporteur or shadow rapporteur for several budgetary impact assessments on defence programmes, fisheries partnership agreements with various CPLP countries and on the flexibility of rural development funds. In addition, following the presentation of the proposal by the European Commission, as I mentioned earlier, the Committee on Budgets is preparing a report on the proposal that will define Parliament's position for negotiations with the Council. In addition to this general report on the proposal, the Committee on Budgets is taking the lead on some of the regulations for the various programmes, in particular the proposed Fund for National and Regional Partnership Plans, and will prepare budgetary impact assessments of the regulations for the various funds and programmes. I have been

appointed by the rapporteur for the Horizon Europe programme and shadow rapporteur for the AgoraEU programme.

**The Committee on Culture also published the Cultural Compass for Europe, and I would like to know what proposals or measures are also being worked on at the level of this committee.**

During this term of office, the Committee on Culture has already approved, as you rightly said, the Cultural Compass for Europe, which was a giant step forward, I would say, because nothing like this existed before. I would say that it is a beacon for cultural issues and the aim is to place culture at the heart of European policies, from the economy to democracy, from territorial cohesion to digital cohesion. In short, culture is a cross-cutting issue. This Cultural Compass for Europe has four guiding pillars, one of which defends European values and cultural rights, because the sustainability of this Europe is very much based on culture. It also defends a second pillar, the empowerment of artists and the enhancement of the profession and all professions related to culture. A third pillar uses culture to be more competitive, resilient and cohesive, and a fourth pillar promotes international cultural relations, that is, it is also a pillar of cultural diplomacy. And so, these four pillars are its main elements, but there are other elements in the compass that I would also like to highlight.

Firstly, a joint declaration, which is Europe for Culture – Culture for Europe, which aims to guarantee shared principles such as artistic freedom, cultural diversity and access to culture and better conditions for artists. Then, we also started to have a periodic report on the state of culture in the European Union, because until then, there was no one in any report who addressed these issues. There is another area that has to do with the European Charter for Artists, so that we can define the principles for decent working conditions for all artists, because artists often express their dissatisfaction with the precarious nature of their work. And finally, the artificial intelligence strategy for cultural and creative circles is also part of this cultural compass. Therefore, I would say that a giant step has already been taken during this term of office in terms of knowing what we want and how we are going to achieve it during these five years. I therefore believe that culture is on the right track, given the good work that has been done over the last few months.

**At the level of the Security and Defence Committee, which is the only one we have left, we have several events taking place worldwide, such as the war in Ukraine, we now have President Donald Trump in the United States, and in Europe, in the midst of this international scenario, there is much talk of the concept of strategic autonomy. How has this concept been debated in the committee's work and what measures are also being taken in this regard?**

In fact, as I said earlier, and this is an observation, within the current treaties, the issue of security and defence has never been directly delegated to the European institutions, and so the Member States have, in a way, always assumed, and rightly

so, defence as their own competence and organised themselves. The issue of the concept of security and defence at European level has only now begun to be raised, precisely, as you rightly said, because of the war in Ukraine, on the one hand, but also because of the role, if you like, of Trump's presidency of the United States of America, where he questioned, first, the usefulness of NATO, and second, the contributions of Member States, And thirdly, by saying that, from now on, Europe would not rely on NATO for its self-defence.



*Hélder Sousa Silva*

This has opened up a window of opportunity for us to design the European Union's own strategy for the coming years. There is a document, Readiness 2030, which is a European Union strategy document for the area of security. In it, we say what we want and the commitments that must be made. Commitments in what sense? In the sense that we say we must have greater coordination, because the treaties will not be changed, and the basic principle that the Member States' own competences will remain.

However, we can do more together, as we do with NATO, because NATO also has no delegated powers, but it does something completely different. I would say that it is about establishing the European pillar of NATO, without leaving NATO, but creating a strong European pillar of NATO, with interoperable equipment and its own deterrent capacity to defend us, which is what we want. We do not want to attack any third country; what we want is to have our own capacity to resist and defend ourselves against any external threat, whether it comes from the east, the west or any of our borders.

Of course, at the moment, the greatest threat comes from the east, particularly from Russia and its neighbouring countries, such as Belarus, and that is why the effort that has been made on the border and in the countries close to the border is much greater, and the support that has also been given to Ukraine since the beginning of the war is considerable, and we have said that we will maintain it for many years to come, for as long as necessary, so that Ukraine can resist and, with Ukraine's resistance, also indirectly defend the territory of the 27 Member States, if we so wish.

Therefore, at this moment, I repeat, there is a great effort to rearm ourselves, a rearmament for self-defence with interoperable equipment, so that when necessary, the equipment can communicate with each other, and with greater funding also in the area of military mobility and, not least, dual-use equipment. Since we are investing, we are investing in equipment that can be used in the military in the event of war, but also in the civilian sector in times of peace, for example. When I buy a semi-trailer or a boat, that boat can be used in times of peace or in times of war. It is from this perspective that the investment is also being made to a large extent.

Finally, within this chapter, the issue of production boils down to producing European, investing European and buying European. What does this mean? It means that investment in European defence industries must become a reality, and therefore also that the clusters in each Member State can be financed through the EDIP, which is a European programme, the European Defence Industry Programme, so that we can create production capacity in Europe and not have to import from the United States, Israel or other countries outside the 27 Member States.

We strive to stay abreast of the latest political developments and send a strong message from the home of European democracy. A message that we are paying attention, that we value the protection of our citizens, and that the response must come at the European level, because the more fragmented and divided we are, the more vulnerable Europe will be.

**Dr. Hélder Sousa Silva is currently President of the Delegation for Relations with the Federative Republic of Brazil. What do these delegations consist of and what are their areas of activity?**

The Delegation for Relations with the Federative Republic of Brazil (D-BR), which I chair, plays a key role in monitoring political, economic and social developments in Brazil. At the moment, for example, this Delegation has an important say in the implementation of the EU-Mercosur agreement, where Brazil plays a crucial role in the Latin American bloc.

There is a long tradition of cooperation between the European Parliament and the Brazilian Congress, with a view to establishing a solid and lasting interparliamentary relationship based on shared values and principles. During Jair Bolsonaro's term in office from 2019 to 2022, this relationship waned, but with the election of Lula da Silva in 2022, it was revived and Brazil reopened itself to the outside world, relaunching relations with the European Union and giving new impetus to this strategic partnership.

This is the moment for the European Union to view Brazil as a strategic partner of excellence and a leading economic player in Latin America, and it should therefore commit to strengthening EU-Brazil relations.

### **What have been the main items on this delegation's agenda so far?**

Our first priority is to promote EU-Brazil relations at parliamentary level. In other words, the main objective of the D-BR's work is to further strengthen parliamentary relations with Brazil. Bilateral parliamentary dialogue covers a range of policy areas, such as climate change, digital technology, energy, science and research, human rights, security and defence, and critical raw materials, among others.

Secondly, we work to protect democracy and multilateralism. For the European Union, it is very important to have a partner in Latin America with the political, economic and social dimension of Brazil. The EU needs more democracies that are effective enough to face the challenges posed by populism around the world.

Then there is the very topical issue of climate change, environmental protection and deforestation, where Brazil is a key global partner. We are working to strengthen cooperation in areas such as the value of carbon credits, climate resilience, disaster reduction, sustainable financing, ecosystem protection and restoration, and deforestation.

Finally, there is a whole range of topics that are always on the agenda, namely the EU-Mercosur Agreement, digital transition, cybersecurity, energy transition, policies to promote gender equality, implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), etc.

As you can see, the agenda is very broad, as are the needs, so the Delegation works daily to strengthen and improve relations between the EU and Brazil.

### **Another delegation you are also part of is the Delegation for Relations with Mercosur. Recently, we have heard a lot of news about the trade agreement between the EU and this economic bloc, due to its implications for the EU, specific countries such as France, and Mercosur itself, of which Brazil is a member, as you mentioned. How is this agreement being worked on in the delegation?**

The EU-Mercosur Agreement, which has been under negotiation for more than 25 years, has been finalised and, following the green light from Parliament, was signed on the 17th. This agreement is an important achievement for the future and an example to be followed in future agreements. It is not just a trade agreement, it is much more than that, as Mercosur countries will be forced to evolve, to make changes, to adapt in order to provide practical and real responses to the requirements of the Agreement. So let there be no doubt: Europe has never made an agreement of this level before. We are talking about a market of more than 700 million people and a quarter of the world economy. It is estimated that the agreement could increase annual EU exports to Mercosur by up to 39% (€49 billion), supporting more than 440,000 jobs across Europe.

The work of this delegation aimed to clarify, inform and demonstrate the value of this agreement in its entirety, as well as its benefits and solutions to the implications raised by sectors such as agriculture and the environment. The delegation played an active role in the negotiations, always attentive and engaged with MEPs and key stakeholders.

**Throughout this interview, we have talked more about your work at European level, but as you mentioned at the beginning, you have worked at local, national and now international level. I would like to know what differences you have noticed at each of these levels, and what links exist between them.**

So, I must be one of the few MEPs who has local government experience, national parliament experience (I just didn't have national government experience) and, in this case, European experience too. It is important to say that at any level where we serve, we all serve the citizens. This is the first point. They all have a purpose, and the ultimate purpose is to serve the citizens, to serve the taxpayers, so to speak, at their different levels.

With one major difference, which is proximity and the time it takes to implement, which is completely different for everyone. So when, at the local level, I have a pothole in the road every day, I have rubbish to collect, and I have to respond directly to citizens, and I do, because I have the necessary tools and means. At the local level, if I have a problem, I can produce a municipal regulation that week, apply it the following week, and in three or four weeks, I have the result of my decision. At national level, time is a completely different factor, because I produce a decree-law, a law, a regulation or whatever, but the time it takes to implement it, whereas at municipal level it is a matter of months, at national level it is a matter of years, i.e. it can take me anywhere from several long months to a year, it is on an annual scale. If we look at the European level, to see the results, I would say that it is on a multi-annual scale, or more than that, certainly always two or three years. Why? Because when a European directive or regulation is drawn up, first of all, there is the time it takes between the institutions, between the legislative impetus, which normally comes from the Commission, and then the two co-legislators, the Council and Parliament, to approve the Commission's proposal. All of this, just this period here, is something that always takes more than a year between the initial impetus and the final publication. If we talk about directives, they then have to be transposed into national legislation, if we want them to be, which takes more time for the national parliament to do. If we also go for regulations, they come into force immediately, which is easier, but in any case we are always talking about two or three years. This time issue, for me, is the most important issue and then also accountability to voters, residents and taxpayers, who are the same people, is also more difficult to account for, given this time lag. So I think this answers the question you asked me, which also comes very much from my experience.

However, I would like to conclude this point, or at least this part of my answer, by saying the following. Despite all this, around 80% of the legislation that applies to us on a daily basis at Member State level is legislation produced at EU level. And so, the consideration or lack thereof, or disregard, or at least the greater or lesser importance given to the European Parliament and institutions, I think should be a cause for reflection and thought for all voters, because if most of the legislation that has an impact on our lives comes from Europe, we must be very careful, first, when we elect our representatives, and second, when we hold them accountable for what they have done and for the political attention we give to the people of Europe.

I believe that the media can be of great assistance here, by increasing the visibility of the work that is done at EU level, because much of the work that is done here is never even brought to the attention of citizens. That is why we are doing this interview, and why you are making this effort, for which I am very grateful, to spread the word, including to the Portuguese diaspora, about the work done by MEPs in Brussels. Regardless of party politics, I must say that a lot of good work is done here, with great purpose, commitment and dedication, which sometimes leaves a bitter taste in the mouth, in the sense that we realise that the work we do is not widely known to our citizens and voters, and that it could be done differently.



*Hélder Sousa Silva in the European Parliament*

# Eleições na Costa Rica

By Jorge Paixão

On February 1, 2026, in the Republic of Costa Rica, the General Elections to elect the Legislative Assembly and the position of the Presidency of the Republic took place. The electoral process was peaceful, in accordance with the country's long democratic tradition, established after the end of the 1948 Civil War, with the subsequent re-establishment of civilian governance and the abolition of the nation's military army.

During this 78-year period, Costa Rica developed its public institutions, its political culture and its civil society, which gave it a reputation for a greater internal stability, when compared to the rest of the Central American countries, which were characterized by cyclical periods of revolutions and military coups, this, together with its diplomatic successes. As was the case of the Esquipulas Peace Agreement, gave the country, also some recognition as "the Switzerland of Central America", not only for its relative diplomatic neutrality and supposed ability to negotiate the ending of regional conflicts, but also for having a high level of human and social development, being the only country in Central America that belongs to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD).



*Presidential candidate of the Sovereign People 's Party, Laura Fernández, waves during the closing rally of her campaign on Paseo Colón Avenue in San Jose, on January 24, 2026. (Photo by EZEQUIEL BECERRA/ AFP)*

## **Context and Outcome of the General Elections**

The two main themes that marked this campaign were the drastic increase in the number of crimes related to drug trafficking, including homicides, that subsequently reflected in a growing sense of public insecurity, and, on the other hand, the alleged degradation of social services and national institutions.

In this sense, the incumbent government of President Rodrigo Chaves Robles, who had been responsible for implementing a more repressive policy on crime, had an electoral reaffirmation of its conservative political project, and Chaves' successor, Laura Fernández, was elected with 48.30% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election, a phenomenon that had not occurred since the 2010 presidential elections. In addition to the favorable result in the position of president, Fernández's party, namely, the Sovereign People's Party, won a majority in the legislative assembly, an exception in Costa Rica's electoral history since the 1990 election, with 31 deputies out of a total of 57. An important feature of this election was also the percentage increase in registered voters who went to the polls, with an increase of about 9% compared to the 2022 general elections.

## **Laura Fernández and the legacy of her predecessor**

According to Costa Rica's 1949 constitution, each President of the Republic is limited to one consecutive term with an eight-year interval before they can run for office again, as such, incumbent Rodrigo Chaves Robles supported the candidacy of his Minister of the Presidency, Laura Fernández. Fernández played a prominent role during Chaves' mandate, not only being his Minister of the Presidency, but also having served as Minister of National Planning and Minister of Economic Policy. Similar to her predecessor, Laura used the growing popular discontent of the public, in the face of the drug trafficking crisis, which allowed her to mobilize certain parts of Puerto Rican civil society, using what her opponents considered to be populist language, examples of this language would be her promises such as "strong and irreversible" to describe the supposed "change" that her government would bring to the country's political status-quo, Fernández, during the campaign also mentioned her interest in declaring a state of emergency as a response to the growth of violent crime, and even proposed the idea of a "third republic", again implying a departure from the political consensus established from 1949 onwards.

The newly elected presidential candidate also said that she would give her predecessor a position in one of the offices of her government, something that would be important for Chaves due to the constant legal constraints he had with the judiciary system throughout his term, restoring his legal immunity until 2030 and thus avoiding any possible trials over accusations of corruption and conflict of interest crimes.

### **A continuation of Rodrigo Chaves Robles' foreign policy?**

Laura's election to the position of president essentially represents a continuation of the conservative ideological vision of the previous government, with a continuous rapprochement of Costa Rica with the United States and El Salvador, countries characterized by their polarizing leader figures, namely Donald J. Trump and Nayib Bukele, especially in the context of the fight against international drug trafficking and the migration crisis. A concrete example of this collaboration would be the continuation of an interstate project initiated by the Chaves government in conjunction with El Salvador, namely, the construction of a prisoner detention center similar to CECOT, even in the face of continued criticism from international human rights groups about the detrimental conditions of prisoners in this type of detention center.

Another crucial international aspect of Fernández's victory would be his reaffirmation of the notion of a "blue tide" in the American continent, with the resurgence in recent years of increasingly conservative political movements in Latin American countries, such as El Salvador, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Honduras. This could play a crucial role in the way diplomacy takes place during the next few years in the region.

# Elections in Japan: Popularity Turned into Consolidation

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By Beatriz Saturnino

Just three months after taking leadership of both the Government and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi called early elections for the lower house of the Japanese parliament. The elections, held on January 19, became a political turning point that significantly consolidated her power and the position of the LDP, while also exposing internal weaknesses and underlying social tensions.

## **A country between stability and strain: inflation, discontent, and government response**

Japan is going through a period marked by economic and social challenges that have strongly shaped political debate and voter sentiment. Inflation, although less pronounced than in other countries, is cited as one of the main sources of discontent, affecting the cost of living and putting pressure on household incomes. To respond to this context, the prime minister implemented a package of measures with a direct impact on citizens' daily lives.

Among the economic policy initiatives, a \$135 billion stimulus package stands out, designed to ease inflationary pressure and restore consumer confidence. This intervention came in response to declining purchasing power, which had become evident in polls and public discourse. In addition, Takaichi promised to suspend the consumption tax on food, a measure with potentially immediate effects on families' daily lives. This promise aimed not only to provide financial relief to households but also to mobilize sectors of the population affected by rising prices. The choice of this measure reflects both economic concerns and a political strategy to strengthen popular support at a time when satisfaction with the government was being tested.

## **Early elections**

These elections were intended to strengthen the LDP's parliamentary power and maximize votes, which could reach up to 465 members in the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the Japanese parliament. This chamber is considered the most important of the two that make up the Japanese parliament, as it holds final decision-making power on essential matters such as approving the budget and selecting the prime minister. In bicameral systems, a consolidated majority in the lower house gives the executive broader legislative room for action and political stability, allowing government programs to be implemented more effectively.

The announcement of these early elections emerged as a deliberate strategy by the prime minister. Just three months after taking office as head of government and leader of the LDP, Takaichi decided to dissolve the lower house and call elections with the explicit aim of turning her popularity into a more consolidated legislative majority. This decision came at a time when the LDP had governed Japan almost uninterruptedly over the past 80 years but had been experiencing declining popularity, partly due to economic and financial scandals and perceptions of corruption. Calling early elections was therefore interpreted as a bold move—a calculated risk to strengthen political authority at a time when the party needed to regain ground and legitimacy.

### **The campaign and main candidates**

The official campaign lasted only 12 days, a short period compared to election campaigns in many democratic countries. This brief timeframe shaped an intense race, in which political messages had to be delivered quickly and with focus. The central figure in this election was, naturally, 64-year-old Sanae Takaichi, who led the LDP and ran for reelection. Takaichi made history as the first woman to lead the Japanese executive. Her leadership was presented not only as a continuation of LDP power but also as a referendum on her own governing style and political vision. Her discourse aimed to consolidate her image as a resolute leader capable of guiding Japan through economic uncertainty and growing geopolitical pressures.

Interestingly, her personal background also drew attention from the media and public opinion. In her youth, Takaichi was a heavy metal drummer, and she is also an admirer of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She has been seen as a charismatic figure, particularly among younger voters. This combination of an unconventional personal profile and political conservatism helped mobilize demographic segments that traditionally remain on the margins of major electoral blocs.

In total, the election featured nearly 1,300 candidates, reflecting the diversity and complexity of Japan's party system. Despite this, the dominant narrative revolved around the opposition between Takaichi and the main leaders attempting to challenge the LDP's dominance, particularly focusing on the leadership of the Democratic Party for the People.

### **Results**

The elections took place under unusual circumstances, occurring amid a severe snowstorm that marked both the campaign and voting day. According to reports, the storm caused around 38 deaths in the country between mid-January and February 8, the election date. Voter turnout was low, reaching just 53.8%—a figure that, although higher than in 2024, still indicates considerable disengagement among the electorate, as well as the difficulties voters faced in reaching polling stations due to the weather.



Voters face harsh climate in order to vote (Source: SIC Notícias)

Takaichi was reelected with an overwhelming majority of 354 votes out of 465 in the lower house—a two-thirds majority for the party led by the ultra-conservative leader, according to *Diário de Notícias*. The runner-up, Yuichiro Tamaki, leader of the Democratic Party for the People, obtained only 50 seats. The LDP alone secured 315 of the 464 seats won by Takaichi.

In the upper house, Takaichi received 123 out of 246 votes, exactly 50% of the total. Following these results, the prime minister stated that she would not make major changes to her cabinet, choosing instead to maintain the government team as it was prior to the election.

This victory was described internally as the best result in the LDP's history, reflecting a recovery of its political standing and Takaichi's ability to effectively channel popular support.

Another significant element was the increase in seats for the anti-immigration Sanseito party, which rose from two to fifteen representatives—clear evidence that more nationalist and restrictive migration discourses are gaining ground in Japanese political debate. In contrast, the so-called New Centrist Alliance—a coalition formed by the main opposition party and the LDP's former partner Komeito—suffered a heavy defeat, losing more than two-thirds of its 172 seats.

On the international stage, Takaichi used her victory to suggest that Japan could intervene militarily if Beijing attempted to take Taiwan by force, referencing rising regional tensions and Japan's strategic role in the Indo-Pacific. This statement reinforces a more assertive vision of Japanese foreign policy, although it has sparked debate both domestically and internationally.



Takaichi's landslide victory (Source: Jornal de Negócios)

A less conventional but politically symbolic aspect of the campaign was the so-called “sanakatsu fever,” a cultural phenomenon in which personal items associated with the prime minister—such as her handbag and the pink pen she uses to take notes in parliament—became popular and sought-after among segments of the population. As a result, Takaichi has also come to be seen almost as a celebrity, gaining even greater prominence as a public figure.

Takaichi's victory attracted global attention and drew international congratulations. In particular, Donald Trump congratulated the prime minister, anticipating a meeting between the two expected to take place in mid-March this year—an indication of shared alliances and geopolitical interests.

## Conclusion

The early elections in Japan resulted in a clear reaffirmation of Sanae Takaichi's leadership and a strengthening of the Liberal Democratic Party's position within Japanese politics. At a time when the country faces economic challenges, regional pressures, and a changing society, the prime minister's “masterstroke” in calling early elections proved to be a strategic moment that reshaped Japan's political landscape. The strengthened parliamentary majority gives Takaichi broad legislative room for action, but also the responsibility to turn that support into concrete responses to voters' expectations.

The outcome of these elections not only confirmed the LDP's historic dominance but also exposed new lines of division and debate in contemporary Japan—between continuity and change, between redistributive economic policies and budgetary constraints, and between national security and regional integration. In a context where the economy, demographics, and international relations are increasingly intertwined, the February 8, 2026 elections may be seen as a turning point in the country's political trajectory—and as an example of how popularity can be leveraged into strategic political moves.

Japan held elections on the same day as Portugal, and the realities experienced by these two countries provide an excellent case study for future comparisons and analysis.

# Elections in Thailand

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By João Confraria

On February 8, Thailand went to the polls in a highly important election that essentially pitted the conservative Bhumjaithai Party, led by Anutin Charnvirakul, against the progressive party led by Natthaphong. Above all, the election reflected a sociological divide between young people in urban areas and elites who for years have depended on military power. When the results were counted, Anutin's conservatives emerged victorious, although without a majority, securing 194 parliamentary seats, while the progressive party suffered defeat with only 116 representatives, losing votes compared to the previous election.

Before explaining the outcome, it is important to provide historical context, as the country's recent past strongly shaped this election. After nine years of military dictatorship in Thailand, supported by the country's wealthiest families—the so-called *Baan Yai*—the 2023 elections created a shock in Thailand's clientelist system, with the victory of the progressive party in what became known as the "orange wave." However, faced with the threat of reform to Thailand's monarchy laws, the Constitutional Court quickly aligned with the economic elite of the *Baan Yai* to dissolve the party and ban its progressive leaders. The party later regrouped under new leadership and ran again this year under a different name. In this context of perceived threat to the Thai system, conservatives reorganized and united around Anutin, a staunch nationalist.

Within this framework, several factors explain the conservatives' victory. First, Thailand's patronage system—marked by clientelist networks—plays a crucial role in mobilizing voters in rural areas in exchange for political favors benefiting local communities and interests. In rural areas, many Thais still view their representatives as clan leaders, turning to them in times of need. These representatives, backed by the economic power of the *Baan Yai*, secure votes through networks of influence, often by granting favors via central government connections to local family heads or key regional figures who mobilize voters through extensive interest-based networks. Given this longstanding feature of Thailand's political system, the progressive party failed to respond effectively, as it did not focus on these clientelist networks, which are also a major source of corruption in the country. Furthermore, it remains insufficiently established in rural areas to build its own support base among older and rural populations.

Second, tensions with Cambodia played a key role in Anutin's nationalist rhetoric. He accused the progressive party of disregarding the military and being incapable of defending the country. In seeking to reduce the political power of the military, the progressive party was unable to dispel the perception that it could not ensure

national defense in the event of a new invasion, particularly given its antagonistic stance toward the military, which has shaped and dominated Thai political life since the Cold War.

Third, the presence of a powerful Senate and Constitutional Court hostile to the progressive party and its proposed reforms contributed to voter resignation. Many who had supported change in 2023 felt that their vote might once again have no political impact and chose not to participate. As a result, these elections saw historically high abstention rates. As one political science expert from the University of Bangkok noted, when political mobilization is low, local influence networks and the economic power of the Baan Yai become decisive factors. This inability to mobilize voters beyond young urban populations proved fatal for the progressives, leaving them likely confined to several years in opposition at a time when Thailand's economic growth has been slowing, debt has reached record levels, and the country is struggling to compete for investment against regional rivals such as Vietnam.

In this context of an unstable international system and uncertain borders, Thailand confirmed the broader global conservative trend that has been strongly shaping elections across continents. In this case, loyalty to local leaders, expectations of future favors, and low mobilization driven by skepticism about change were the most decisive factors, perpetuating a kind of historical inertia that other countries in the region have managed to overcome.



Thai citizens went to the polls on the 8th of February (Source: Al Jazeera)

# Munich Security Conference 2026 reaffirms commitment to collective security amid global tensions

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By Magda Gonçalves

The Munich Security Conference, held between February 13 and 15, 2026, in Munich, Germany, reaffirmed itself as one of the main global forums for strategic dialogue on international security. Bringing together heads of state and government, ministers, leaders of multilateral organizations, and experts, the meeting took place in a context of high geopolitical tension, marked by the ongoing war in Ukraine, the redefinition of transatlantic relations, and the rise of technological and energy risks.

Under the motto of the annual report *Munich Security Report 2026 - "Under Destruction"*. The debates were framed by the perception that the rules-based international order faces simultaneous military, economic, and institutional pressures. Thus, over the three days, the plenary sessions and parallel meetings sought to answer a central question: how to preserve international stability in a scenario of increasing fragmentation.

## **Collective security and war in Ukraine**

From the opening session, the war in Ukraine occupied a prominent position. The panel dedicated to the sustainability of international support for Kyiv focused on the need for long-term political and military coordination.

In this context, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte stated that the Alliance is "stronger than at any time since the end of the Cold War," emphasizing that unity among allies constitutes an essential deterrent. The statement was interpreted as a sign of strategic continuity and a reaffirmation of collective commitment.

For his part, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy argued that any diplomatic solution must be based on robust and lasting security guarantees. In a widely watched speech, he declared that peace "cannot be negotiated in haste," warning that hasty concessions could compromise the future stability of Europe. His participation was considered one of the most important of the conference, both for its content and for the political symbolism it carries.



Intervention by Volodymyr Zelenskyy (source: Euronews)

### **Transatlantic relations and the role of the United States of America**

Meanwhile, relations between Europe and the US constituted another structuring axis of the discussions. Several panels debated the sharing of defense burdens and the balance between strategic autonomy and transatlantic commitment. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio highlighted the historical value of Euro-Atlantic cooperation, stating, "We are gathered here today as members of a historic alliance, an alliance that has saved and changed the world". The declaration sought to reinforce the continuity of the strategic partnership while acknowledging the need to adapt to new geopolitical realities. Even so, parallel analyses revealed differences in emphasis regarding the degree of European leadership and the financing of common defense.



Intervention by Marco Rubio (source: Reuters)

### **Strategic autonomy and European defense**

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasized, in this regard, that the European Union's defense capabilities must be strengthened in a structured and coordinated manner, stating that "mutual defense is not optional



Intervention by Ursula von der Leyen (source: Reuters)

for the European Union, but rather an obligation". This intervention was interpreted as a clear call for deepening integration in defense matters and strengthening the European industrial base, complementing, and not replacing, the role of NATO. Thus, the debate highlighted a certain convergence regarding the importance of cooperation and the European determination to expand its own strategic autonomy.

### **Technological security, energy security, and economic resilience.**

Beyond the military dimension, the conference paid particular attention to hybrid threats, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. The report "Under Destruction" highlighted that critical infrastructure, data flows, and global supply chains have become central elements of contemporary security. Consequently, several stakeholders advocated for digital resilience policies and technological diversification as instruments of stability.

In parallel, energy security was debated from the perspective of climate transition and the reduction of strategic dependencies. The interconnection between energy, economy, and defense was widely recognized as a determining factor for the sovereignty of states.

### **Strategic connectivity: the "Middle Corridor"**

Additionally, one of the moments of particular interest was the debate dedicated to the so-called "Trans-Caspian Middle Corridor," a transport route linking Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea. The Vice-President of the MSC Foundation Board, Helga Maria Schmid, stated that "diversifying trade routes not only increases economic resilience but also convincingly reinforces Europe's security agenda", reinforcing the idea that security and logistics have become inextricably linked to the international strategic agenda.



### **Final considerations and future perspectives**

In summary, the Munich Security Conference 2026 demonstrated that, although differences persist regarding methods and priorities, there is widespread recognition of the need for structured cooperation in the face of common threats. By articulating debates on war, alliances, regional autonomy, technology, and the economy, the meeting reaffirmed its role as a privileged space for preventive diplomacy and strategic coordination.

Although it did not produce binding decisions, the conference's relevance lies in its ability to bridge positions, clarify differences, and signal political commitments. In an international scenario marked by uncertainties, the 2026 edition consolidated Munich as one of the main barometers of contemporary global security.

# African Union Summit

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By Raquel Bravo

The 39th Summit of Heads of State and Government took place over the weekend of February 14–15, 2026, in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, where the African Union is headquartered.

## What is the African Union Summit?

Let us begin by clarifying what this summit is: it is the main African political forum and the continent's most important annual meeting. Here, the leaders of the 55 African countries represented in the international organization known as the African Union define political priorities, discuss conflicts and regional security, make economic decisions, and coordinate international positions.

## Main topics discussed:

### Security and Armed Conflicts

The top priority in this year's discussions was security and armed conflicts—one of the greatest concerns on the African continent, posing an existential threat to stability and development in Africa. African leaders paid particular attention to the situations in the Sahel, Sudan, and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), acknowledging that these conflicts have serious humanitarian, political, and economic consequences.

In the case of the Sahel, the African Union highlighted the expansion of jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which have weakened state authority and contributed to instability in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The organization stressed the need to promote "African solutions to African problems," reducing dependence on external interventions and strengthening state institutions.

The summit also addressed the civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), calling for an immediate ceasefire and the resumption of political dialogue. In this context, the organization emphasized the importance of an African-led solution, despite the growing influence of external powers.

The conflict in eastern DRC was also a concern, particularly due to the presence of the M23 rebel group and tensions with Rwanda, which continues to play a dominant role in the region and is accused of supporting the rebels. A peace agreement—the Washington Agreements for Peace and Prosperity—was signed in June 2025 in Washington, mediated by the United States. It aimed to end decades of tension and

conflict in Eastern Congo, focusing on disarmament, the withdrawal of Rwandan troops, and regional economic integration. However, fighting continues because the M23 group was not directly included in the main agreement, raising doubts about the long-term effectiveness of the ceasefire and undermining regional stability.

The African Union also highlighted the involvement of external powers, particularly the United States. Under Donald Trump's administration, the U.S. mediated the agreement, driven by strategic interests in the DRC's mineral resources, such as cobalt. In this context, the organization once again defended African autonomy, reinforcing its role as the main actor in resolving the continent's major conflicts.

### **Climate Change**

Another issue that occupied a central place on the agenda was climate change. Among the main phenomena affecting Africa are severe droughts, lack of potable water, desertification, and their impact on populations and agricultural practices. Extreme events are becoming increasingly frequent, such as tropical cyclones—illustrated by Cyclone Freddy in Mozambique—devastating droughts in Southern Africa and the Sahel, and coastal risks due to rising sea levels, which already exceed the global average in areas such as Benin, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Congo. In this regard, water security was the summit's priority theme, with the African Union considering improved water and sanitation management essential to enhancing living conditions for its populations.

### **Economic Development and Continental Integration**

Accelerating Africa's economic development was also a key topic of discussion. The main objectives included increasing trade between African countries, reducing external dependence, developing infrastructure, and strengthening the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aims to create a large single African market (similar to the European single market).

### **Election of the AU's Annual Leadership**

Finally, another fundamental aspect of the summit was the election of the AU's annual leadership. Each year, a new president is chosen—a role that is highly relevant in practice, as this leader represents the continent politically and coordinates priorities, acting as an international diplomatic figure. This year, Évariste Ndayishimiye, President of Burundi, was elected, replacing João Lourenço, President of Angola, who held the position in 2025.

During his closing speech reviewing his 12 months in leadership, João Lourenço announced that Angola's capital, Luanda, will host an extraordinary session of the Conference of Heads of State and Government later this year, dedicated to analyzing ways to respond to threats to peace, security, and development on the continent. He also expressed concern about the emergence of new phenomena in recent times that should not be legitimized by the AU's Peace and Security Council.

## Global Importance of the Summit

This meeting is significant not only in the African context but worldwide. Africa's population represents a substantial share of the global population—1.4 billion people—and the continent possesses essential natural resources. It is also an increasingly important player in global geopolitics and a region where powers such as China, the United States, the European Union, and Gulf countries compete for influence.



*End of João Lourenço's leadership as President of the African Union (Source: GIRA Notícias)*

The commitment agreed upon at the summit is therefore to make Africa more stable, more prosperous, and more influential in the current international system. However, it is important to question the extent to which the promises made at the summit will translate into concrete results. Effective action is limited by financial constraints, dependence on external funding, political divisions among member states, and several other factors already mentioned, including the persistence of armed conflicts, coups d'état, and humanitarian crises.



*Thirty-ninth Summit of Heads of State and Government of the African Union (Source: RDP África)*

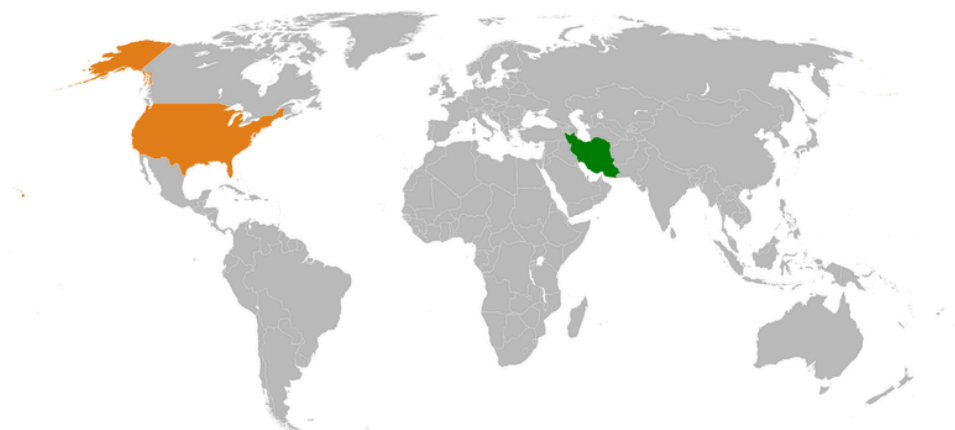
# Conflict Clarified: US-Iran Conflict

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By Dario Vargas

## What conflict is this?

The enmity between Iran and the United States, dating back to 1979 and which escalated to an American attack on Iranian military installations in 2025, represents one of the most prominent dynamics in the Persian Gulf as well as in the Middle East as a whole.



*World map highlighting the United States (orange) and Iran (green) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

## How did it begin?

The hostility between Iran and the United States is the product of a series of interactions between the two states during the Cold War. In the years following the Second World War, Iran — a source of vast oil and natural gas reserves monopolised by the United Kingdom — was a constitutional monarchy marked by tensions between the monarch, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and a pro-democracy coalition called the National Front, led in 1951 by Mohammad Mosaddegh, who was elected Prime Minister of the country that year.

The National Front, channelling popular discontent with the British presence in the country, which they regarded as a colonialist relationship, nationalised the oil industry — an action that provoked a forceful reaction from the United Kingdom, which initiated an economic blockade and planned a coup against Mosaddegh. The United States joined this effort, seeing the growth of the communist party in Iran and Mosaddegh's social-democratic leanings as a danger of the country drawing closer to the Soviet Union. The coup against Mosaddegh was carried out in 1953, following a crisis between him and the Shah that led to the monarch's flight, followed by a military operation that resulted in the Prime Minister's imprisonment.

After the coup, the Shah governed the country as an autocrat, allowing the return of British companies and drawing Iran closer to the United States at a strategic level. During this period, the Iranian monarchy relied on SAVAK, a secret police force that persecuted opponents of the regime. At the same time, from 1960 onwards, the White Revolution was launched — a sweeping policy aimed at modernising the country through, among other measures, agrarian reform and the implementation of programmes intended to improve the quality of life and literacy of the population. These measures, however, had uneven effects and were accompanied by steps that called into question the country's traditional social norms and institutions in favour of Western cultural standards, turning several sectors of the population against the government.

Tensions over the White Revolution, government repression, and the high level of Western influence over the country led to the growth of opposition to the regime — a coalition that included liberal movements, socialist groups, and traditionalist forces led by Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shia cleric known as Ayatollah. These groups came together and, in 1979, following a wave of protests against the Shah after a period of economic stagnation, forced the royal family into exile, bringing an end to the Pahlavi regime. However, the revolutionary coalition quickly divided, and in the ensuing power struggle, Khomeini's movement consolidated control, banning the remaining movements and implementing a theocratic republic under his leadership, which would go on to establish a new apparatus of repression.

From the revolution onwards, relations between Iran and the United States deteriorated rapidly, particularly following the Iranian Hostage Crisis — an occupation of the American embassy in Iran by supporters of the Ayatollah, who took a number of American diplomats hostage. This event strengthened Khomeini's position and contributed to his rise, but led to the complete severing of relations between the two countries.

Tensions between Iran and the United States led the American state — seeking to contain the spread of the Iranian Revolution as envisioned by Khomeini — to provide military support to Iraq, then led by Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Iran in 1980. The Iran–Iraq War, which lasted eight years and ended inconclusively, deepened the enmity between the states, despite the United States covertly supplying military equipment to Iran in order to fund the Contras, a guerrilla movement in Nicaragua.

Alongside this conflict, Iran sought to support the creation of groups sympathetic to its ideology and antagonistic to American interests and those of its allies. To this end, the Iranian state coordinated the organisation of Hezbollah, a Lebanese insurgent group that emerged following the Israeli invasion of the country in 1982 and which would go on to attack American forces on Lebanese soil. This connection between Hezbollah and the Iranian authorities led the American

government to designate Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, further limiting possible interactions between the two states. In addition to Hezbollah, Iran would go on to support the creation of Hamas, a Palestinian insurgent group founded in 1987 that became involved in a series of confrontations against Israel; the Houthis, a Yemeni insurgent group that came to dominate the north of the country during the Yemeni Civil War, which began in 2014; as well as a series of Iraqi militias formed following the American Invasion of Iraq in 2003.

From 2013 onwards, relations between the two countries saw a slight improvement, leading to the negotiation in 2015 of an agreement seeking to limit the expansion of Iran's nuclear programme — founded in 1957 but which had become a point of contention, as the United States feared it would be used for military purposes, accusations rejected by Tehran — in exchange for an easing of international sanctions against the Iranian state, aimed at restricting the expansion of its military arsenal and pressuring the regime. At the same time, the two states began limited cooperation to combat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and, later, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

However, in 2018, the United States — seeking a more comprehensive agreement that would encompass Iran's stockpiling of ballistic weapons — withdrew from the deal, reinstating previously implemented sanctions and introducing new measures aimed at pressuring the Iranian government. In response, Iran reneged on its commitments under the agreement, beginning uranium enrichment beyond the established limits, while reiterating that its nuclear programme sought merely to generate energy.

These tensions escalated in 2020 when the United States assassinated Qasem Soleimani, leader of the Quds Force — an Iranian military unit specialising in international operations and consequently one of the leading figures in the Iranian security apparatus. Following the assassination, the United States imposed new sanctions against Iran, while Iran, through foreign militias allied to its regime, carried out a wave of intermittent attacks against American forces in the Middle East.

With the outbreak of the Hamas–Israel War in 2023, Iran found itself in a position of growing tension with Israel as a consequence of its support for Hamas. The escalation of the conflict in Gaza, as well as the onset of a series of direct confrontations between the Israeli state and the Iranian state, shaped American diplomacy, which in 2025 had begun negotiations with Iran over the signing of a new nuclear agreement — negotiations that, however, stalled. In order to pressure Iran, the United States carried out, in 2025, a series of airstrikes against Iranian military targets, damaging its nuclear programme. This attack marked the greatest escalation of tensions between the two states, but was followed by a limited Iranian response, such that negotiations between the states were resumed later that same year.

However, in 2026, tensions between the two states reignited after the United States condemned the heavy-handed response of the Iranian authorities to a wave of protests against the regime — which resulted in thousands of deaths — and pushed for the inclusion of negotiations over Iran's ballistic missile stockpiles, a condition rejected by the Iranian government, which sought to limit negotiations to its nuclear programme. At the end of February of that year, the United States, joined by Israel, launched a series of airstrikes against Iranian targets, citing the country's nuclear programme as the reason for the military operation. This conflict resulted in the death of Iran's Supreme Leader — Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — as well as other Iranian government officials and security forces.

### **How is it relevant to Portugal?**

Portugal maintains diplomatic relations with both Iran — having an embassy in Tehran — and the United States — having an embassy in Washington D.C. By virtue of both being members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and of Portugal permitting American use of Air Base No. 4 in Lajes, Portugal maintains close ties with the United States, while nonetheless maintaining a series of bilateral agreements with Iran in the areas of education and culture, with a number of mutual state visits having taken place over the years. The Portuguese state is also strongly aligned with the European position regarding tensions between the two states, condemning the United States' withdrawal from the 2015 agreement on account of its commitment to diplomatic initiatives, but also condemning the repressive measures of the Iranian government and participating in European sanctions against it.

Confrontations between the United States and Iran have an indirect and damaging effect on the national economy, by driving up the price of petroleum products — essential for economic activity and as fuel — due to risks to commercial shipping routes through the Persian Gulf, through which nearly 30% of maritime oil transport passes. Thus, the disruption of supply chains in this region would have the effect of driving inflation and, in an extreme scenario, of reducing national GDP.

Beyond the economic dimension, tensions between the United States and Iran also pose a danger to Portuguese citizens on Iranian soil, who may become targets of detention by the government due to Portugal's status as an American ally.

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