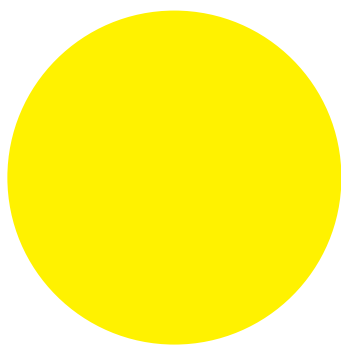


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## Resilience under sanctions



By M.A. Mokarrami  
Journalist, commentator

O P I N I O N  
E X C L U S I V E

Iran is once again facing renewed international sanctions and intensified economic pressure from the United States. At the same time, meaningful negotiations to lift these sanctions remain out of reach. Western governments, especially Washington, are demanding concessions on nuclear, defense and regional issues, while Iran insists that any talks must be based on equality and mutual respect. In this situation, where diplomacy is limited and no immediate relief from sanctions is expected, the essential question is how Iran can manage the economic consequences until fair conditions for dialogue are restored. The answer lies in combining active external engagement with practical and disciplined domestic economic policies.

Diplomacy must be used not only for political messaging but also to secure economic interests. Genuine economic diplomacy requires Iranian embassies and the Economic Diplomacy Department of the Foreign Ministry to identify trade opportunities, investment capacities and mutual needs in host countries. Economic experts can play a more effective role by mapping markets, reducing bureaucratic obstacles and creating direct communication between Iranian and foreign businesses through chambers of commerce, exhibitions and digital platforms. The region offers the most realistic options. A large part of Iran's trade is already with neighboring countries such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq. Expanding diplomatic visits, improving customs infrastructure, developing transit routes and establishing local currency mechanisms can help make these relationships more stable and productive. At the same time, Iran should deepen partnerships with non-Western powers such as China and Russia, and use frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and

BRICS to access markets, financial systems and technologies that are less influenced by Western sanctions. Still, diplomacy alone is not sufficient. To withstand economic pressure, Iran needs a strong and flexible internal economy. In a time of limited resources and financial restrictions, the focus should be on preserving production, employment and economic stability. Support must be directed to firms that genuinely create value, operate transparently and maintain responsible financial practices. Companies with healthy performance, proper corporate governance and export capacity—such as many listed firms—should receive tax incentives, predictable regulations and easier access to financing. Providing working capital for creditworthy firms is critical so they can continue operating and investing. Energy, which is vital for industry and services, should be supplied through transparent and market-based mechanisms, such as commodity exchanges, to prevent disruptions for productive companies. Exporters should be allowed to sell their foreign cur-

rency earnings in official markets based on real supply and demand, enabling them to benefit fairly from their efforts and reinvest in growth. Macroeconomic policy must support efficient resource allocation. Artificially suppressing interest rates may seem helpful but often results in misused credit, rent-seeking and weaker productivity. Realistic interest rates help direct capital toward businesses that can use it effectively to generate added value. Similarly, unnecessary price controls in competitive markets should be avoided. When prices are allowed to reflect real conditions, they send accurate signals to producers and investors. If a sector faces higher demand or supply shortages, increased prices encourage new investment, expand production and eventually stabilize the market naturally. In contrast, fixed prices can create shortages, discourage innovation and reduce quality. The government should instead focus on regulating monopolistic sectors, ensuring fair competition and supporting low-income households through targeted welfare measures

rather than across-the-board price fixing. Economic resilience also depends on transparency, stable regulations and trust between the government and private sector. Producers, exporters and entrepreneurs are on the frontline of the economic struggle. Just as soldiers in military conflict are supported to defend the country, those who sustain the economy under sanctions—by creating jobs, generating foreign currency and keeping industries alive—deserve full support and a predictable environment. Until fair negotiations are possible, Iran can limit the damage of sanctions by pursuing a dual strategy. Abroad, it should strengthen economic diplomacy, especially with neighbors and strategic partners in Asia and Eurasia. At home, it should implement reforms that channel resources to productive sectors, support value-creating businesses and maintain macroeconomic discipline. This approach will not eliminate sanctions, but it can help Iran protect its economy, reduce social harm and be better prepared for the moment when diplomatic opportunities return.



# No choice but to confront 'fake regime' of Israel: *Iran*

Tehran decries assassination of Hezbollah cmdr. as 'gross violation' of truce deal

## International Desk

Iran's top security official on Sunday extended condolences over the assassination of a senior Hezbollah commander by Israel, saying that there is no choice but to confront the "fake regime."

"[Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu continues his adventurism to the point that everyone realizes there is no option left but to confront this fake regime," Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Larijani said in a post on X.

His comments came after Israeli regime killed Hezbollah's top military commander Haytham Ali Tabatabai in an air strike on Lebanon's capital, Beirut.

Tabatabai was among at least five people who were killed in the attack on an apartment block in Dahiyeh in southern Beirut. Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health said the Israeli attack also wounded 28 people.

Tabatabai is the most senior Hezbollah commander to be killed by Israel since the start of a November 2024 ceasefire aimed at ending over a year of hostilities between the two sides.

Tabatabai was born in 1968 in Beirut to a Lebanese mother and an Iranian father. He grew up in southern Lebanon and reportedly joined Hezbollah in the 1980s. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun called on the international community to intervene firmly to stop the Israeli attacks on the country. In a statement earlier on Sunday, Aoun said Lebanon "reiterates its call to the international community to assume its responsibility and intervene firmly and seriously to stop the attacks on Lebanon and its people."

Iran's Foreign Ministry also condemned the assassination of the Hezbollah commander, calling it a "gross violation" of the November 2024 ceasefire agreement and a "brutal attack" on Lebanon's sov-

ereignty.

The ministry emphasized the necessity of holding criminal Israeli leaders accountable for "terrorist acts" and war crimes.

The ministry also criticized the United States for its support of Israel, suggesting that this backing has caused the repeated violations of the ceasefire by the Zionist regime.

The Israeli attack on the southern suburbs of the Lebanese capital is the latest blatant violation of the ceasefire Israel signed with Hezbollah in November 2024, which was intended to end hostilities that had escalated into full-scale war. An Israeli strike on the Ain al-Hilweh camp near Sidon in southern Lebanon late Tuesday killed at least 14 people.

According to Lebanese authorities, Israeli attacks have killed approximately 4,000 people and displaced more than 1.2 million residents across the country since October 2023.



Mourners carry the coffin of Hezbollah military chief Haytham Ali Tabatabai during a funeral in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon on November 24, 2025.

REUTERS

## Iran announces full containment of fire in UNESCO-listed forests

### National Desk

Head of Iran's Crisis Management Headquarters Hossein Sajedinia announced on Monday that a widespread fire in the country's northern forests has been fully contained after nine days of efforts by rescue teams and the support of local residents.

However, Sajedinia, said that operations are underway to look for hidden fires. Rescue teams will remain in the area until the official announcement of the full containment of the fire.

Sajedinia also thanked Turkey after the neighboring country dispatched



IRNA

two water-bombing aircraft and a helicopter to extinguish fire. The fire in UNESCO World Heritage-listed Hyrcanian forests, which was allegedly started by hunters in the rocky area of Elit village in northern Mazandaran Province in

early November and was initially quelled, reignited on November 15. The Hyrcanian forests stretch for about 1,000 kilometers along the Iranian coast of the Caspian Sea and into neighboring Azerbaijan.

UNESCO recognized the forests as a World Heritage Site in 2019, deeming them unique for both their age – between 25 and 50 million years old – and their varied biodiversity, as home to more than 3,200 species of plants.

UNESCO says on its website the Hyrcanian forests contain "a large number of rare and endemic tree species" and are home to "many relic and endangered plant species."

## Larijani hails Pakistan's stance during Israeli war ahead of visit

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Larijani said he was set to depart for the "friendly and brotherly country" of Pakistan on Monday, praising the eastern neighbor for supporting Tehran during Israeli aggression in June.

"Today, I am traveling to Pakistan, our friendly and brotherly country in the region," Larijani wrote in a post on his X account.

"Iranians do not forget that during the 12-day war by the Zionist regime and the United States against Iran, the Pakistani nation stood by the Iranian

nation," he added.

On June 13, Israel launched an unprovoked war against Iran, killing dozens of high-ranking military commanders and nuclear scientists as well as hundreds of civilians.

More than a week later, the US also entered the war by bombing three Iranian nuclear sites in a grave violation of the United Nations Charter, international law, and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

On June 24, Iran, through its retaliatory strikes against both Israel and the US, imposed a halt to the assault.

Larijani underscored that Iran and Pakistan are "two important and influential countries" in ensuring regional stability, adding that Tehran attaches great importance to maintaining fraternal relations among regional states. In October, during a meeting with Pakistan's Interior Minister Syed Mohsin Naqvi in Tehran, Larijani underlined the geopolitical importance of both countries in regional equations.

He also emphasized the need to deepen cooperation in security, defense, political, and especially economic fields.

## IMO an opportunity to solidify Iran's role in int'l maritime decision-making: *Official*

### International Desk

Iran's Managing Director of the Ports and Maritime Organization Saeed Rasouli said on Monday that the 34<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in London is an opportunity to solidify Iran's role in decision-making in this field. The IMO assembly will meet for its 34<sup>th</sup> regular session from November 24 to December 3 to elect the members of the IMO Council.

Saeed Rasouli in an interview with IRNA pointed to the importance of Iran's presence at the assembly, saying that the meeting is one of the most significant events of global maritime governance. "This assembly, which will be held over two weeks at IMO headquarters in Lon-



IRNA

don, brings together senior maritime officials from member states to discuss and decide on the future of the maritime transport industry, policies, regulations, and the challenges facing this sector," Rasouli said.

"For us, as a country with a long history and extensive capacities in maritime and port affairs, active participation in this assembly is important, because it is an

opportunity to present the positions of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the highest level, to solidify our constructive role in global decision-making, and to take steps toward enhancing the maritime standing of our country," added.

Rasouli said that the election of IMO Council members for the next two years and determining the IMO budget are the key issues on the session's agenda.

He said that Iran will participate in the meeting with "an active and constructive approach" to represent Iran's extensive capacities in the maritime area, its central role in international corridors, and to emphasize Iran's readiness for a stronger presence in global decision-making in order to safeguard the country's national interests and maritime rights.

## FM spox: IAEA's anti-Iran resolution 'stain of disgrace' on sponsors



TASNIM

The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman condemned a recent resolution passed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regarding the country's peaceful nuclear program as a "stain of disgrace" on the document's sponsors.

Esmail Baqaei made the remarks two days after the IAEA's Board of Governors adopted by a narrow margin the anti-Iran resolution proposed by France, the UK, Germany, and the United States, Press TV reported.

He said there was no goodwill behind the resolution, which merely makes Iran's nuclear issue more complicated, rather than helping to resolve it.

"In my view, the content of the resolution is a stain of disgrace upon those who drafted and promoted it," he added.

The resolution, he emphasized, "not only violates the regulations of the United Nations Security Council and the previous practices of the IAEA, but also fails to make even the slightest reference to the root cause of the problem — namely, the crimes committed by the Israeli regime and the US in their attacks on Iran's peaceful nuclear facilities."

Baqaei further noted that the resolution constitutes blatant interference in the IAEA's work and will further undermine the agency's independence.

The IAEA's resolution urged Tehran to "without delay" report on its enriched uranium stockpile and facilities damaged in the Israeli-US June aggression, while failing to mention Iran's longstanding cooperation with the IAEA.

Iran's Foreign Ministry said the "illegal and unjustified" document reflects the US bullying and the duplicitous behavior of the three European states.

The Islamic Republic also announced the termination of the deal signed in Egypt's Cairo in September to resume cooperation with the UN's nuclear watchdog.

The ties had been suspended after the unprovoked US-Israeli aggression against Iran on June 13-24 that killed at least 1,064 people in Iran, most of them civilians.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi  
Cartoonist

CARTOON





# Iran's shrimp output hits 50K tons; exports reach CIS, Europe: *Union chief*

By Sadeq Dehqan  
Staff writer

## INTERVIEW

Iran's annual shrimp production is earmarked to be approximately 50,000 tons, and its exports span Persian Gulf countries, Russia, CIS nations (including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan), and Europe, according to Ali Khatibi-Tabar, head of Aquatics' Production & Trade Union of Iran.

In an interview with Iran Daily, Khatibi-Tabar said Iran is utilizing only about 5% of its actual capacity in shrimp production despite possessing extensive clean coastal waters and ideal conditions for aquaculture.

The official emphasized that shrimp farming requires no freshwater resources, offers substantial economic development opportunities, creates jobs in coastal regions, and could significantly boost exports.

"The southern coasts of the country, especially along the Sea of Oman, have vast untapped potential due to deeper, cleaner waters with better circulation — ideal for shrimp farming," he said.

Beyond shrimp, these waters also support the cultivation of diverse marine products such as shellfish, sea cucumbers, and seaweed, further expanding the sector's production capacity.

Fully harnessing these resources, Khatibi-Tabar noted, could position Iran as a major global shrimp producer and elevate its international trade standing.

"The time has come to deploy modern technologies and expand infrastructure to unlock

Iran's full shrimp production potential and secure its rightful place in global markets," he said. Iran has already achieved notable export successes despite sanctions, primarily targeting Russia, Egypt, and other regional markets. However, those markets have weakened economically due to ongoing regional conflicts, reducing their purchasing power. "This isn't related to [anti-Iran] sanctions — it's due to the economic conditions in our target countries," Khatibi-Tabar clarified.

Efforts to enter new markets are underway, but international certification remains a hurdle. "We have no problem obtaining standards domestically, but sanctions make it more difficult to secure international certifications," he explained, adding that multiple strategies are being employed to overcome this barrier.

### Market challenges cloud outlook

Khatibi-Tabar warned that 2025 will not be a strong year for Iran's shrimp industry, citing global oversupply — estimated at around 3 million metric tons — and trade disruptions stemming from US tariffs imposed during the Trump administration. Ecuador, the world's top shrimp producer with an output of 1.2 million tons, is unable to export directly to the US due to heavy tariffs and instead ships mostly to Europe and China. Meanwhile, India — another major producer — faces a 50% US tariff, contributing to global market volatility.



MEHR



Ali Khatibi-Tabar

### Iran's stance

Iran's annual shrimp production is projected at approximately 50,000 tons, though exact figures remain uncertain as the country is still in harvest season. Of this, only about 3,000 tons are consumed domestically; the rest is exported.

Iranian shrimp exports face a 12% tariff in the European Union—a rate unchanged since

the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013)—while Ecuador enjoys zero tariffs and India pays just 2.8%. Iran exports to Persian Gulf countries, Russia, CIS nations (including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan), and Europe.

### Domestic production profile

All of Iran's shrimp is farmed; the country has no wild-caught shrimp fisheries. Production is

concentrated in five provinces: Khuzestan, Bushehr, Hormozgan, Sistan and Baluchestan, and Golestan. Harvesting typically occurs twice a year. Shrimp farming in Iran uses saline water and non-arable coastal or salt-affected lands, avoiding pressure on the country's scarce freshwater resources. The industry also drives infrastructure development — including roads, electricity, and security — and supports

processing plants that generate widespread employment.

From a hygiene standpoint, Iranian shrimp farms benefit from pristine, pollution-free environments. In contrast, Indian farms are often situated near rice paddies, where agricultural runoff and pesticides contaminate shrimp ponds — leading to higher rejection rates for Indian exports. "Our product does not face such issues," Khatibi-Tabar stressed.

## IFO launches joint initiative to curb plastic waste, promote sustainable fishing



IRNA

### Economy Desk

Iran's Fisheries Organization (IFO) launched a joint program with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to reduce plastic waste and promote sustainable fishing practices.

The initiative targets the global problem of abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) and is

being implemented in coordination with Iran's Department of Environment to manage plastic waste and raise awareness among fishing communities, according to a report by Tasnim citing the Agricultural Ministry's information portal.

A specialized training workshop is scheduled with representatives and experts from relevant organizations to lay the

groundwork for operational measures aimed at reducing plastic pollution and protecting the country's marine ecosystems.

The Office for Conservation and Rehabilitation of Marine Resources at IFO — serving as a member of the national task force reviewing the draft treaty on plastic pollution — has already undertaken significant actions.

These include participation in the plastic pollution crisis conference, development of a national strategic waste management plan, and submission of reports on waste generated by fisheries units.

In parallel, technical meetings have been held with the Iranian Fisheries Science Research Institute and the Department of Environment to formulate a plan addressing ghost nets, plastic debris, and other discarded fishing equipment. Other notable efforts include involvement in sessions to define evaluation indicators for national environmental policies in the fisheries sector, collaboration in organizing an international waste management and recycling exhibition, and participation in meetings on marine waste disposal held by the Ports and Maritime Organization.

## Non-oil trade volume posts slight rise; value falls nearly 10%: *IRICA*



IRNA

### Economy Desk

Iran's non-oil foreign trade rose by 2.8% in volume during the first seven months of the current Iranian year (which began March 21), but the total value dropped by 9.7% compared to the same period last year, according to the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA)'s official data cited by ISNA.

Exports of non-oil goods in the seven-month peri-

od reached approximately 91.9 million metric tons, valued at \$32 billion. This compares with 89 million tons worth \$32.636 billion during the same timeframe in the previous year — reflecting a 3.20% increase in weight but a 1.88% decline in dollar value.

Imports during the same period totaled 22.3 million tons, valued at \$34.2 billion, up from 21.944 million tons worth \$40.804 billion a year earlier, which represents a

1.60% year-on-year increase in import volume but a sharp 16.07% drop in value. Overall, Iran's total non-oil trade in the first seven months of the year amounted to 114.237 million tons, valued at \$66.272 billion.

In the corresponding period last year, the figure stood at 111.038 million tons worth \$73.440 billion, confirming the trend of rising trade volume alongside a significant contraction in monetary value.



## Beyond stereotypes

## Dismantling Western fictions about Iranian women



By Asgar Ghahremanpour  
Editor-in-chief

## INTERVIEW

*Ecatarina-Elena Matoi is a political and security consultant and a scholar of Middle Eastern politics. Her work bridges academic research, teaching, and policy. She holds two doctorates: one in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Basel, Switzerland, and another in Intelligence and National Security from the National Defence University in Bucharest, Romania.*

*In this exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Matoi, an independent political and security consultant from Romania, offers a profound and analytical perspective on the portrayal of Iranian women in Western media and institutions. Drawing on field research and the lived experiences of Iranian women, she demonstrates that dominant Western narratives are often selective, incomplete, and one-dimensional.*

*Matoi carefully examines the differences between social, cultural, and political pressures in Iran and external perceptions, emphasizing that Iranian women, grounded in their cultural and religious values, play influential and constructive roles in both family and society.*

*This conversation provides a fresh perspective on the resilience, agency, and multifaceted identities of Iranian women, highlighting how field-based analyses can deliver a far more accurate understanding of their real lives.*



Ecatarina-Elena Matoi



An Iranian woman walks past a mural on a street in Tehran, Iran, on October 20, 2025.

● EFE

**IRAN DAILY:** How do Western media and institutions portray Iranian women, and to what extent does this portrayal align with the social and cultural realities in Iran?

**MATOI:** Western media and institutions predominantly portray Iranian women through the lens of victimhood — focusing heavily on veiling, restrictions on personal freedoms, and instances of protest or punishment — presenting them as largely oppressed and lacking full agency within a strict patriarchal and theocratic system. This framing, while issues and events, often becomes the dominant and sometimes exclusive narrative, overshadowing all dimensions of Iranian women's lives and contributions.

In practice, this portrayal aligns only partially with Iran's complex social reality, where women's identities, aspirations, and sources of strength are profoundly shaped by a distinct cultural, religious (Shia Islam), historical, and geopolitical context that prioritizes family cohesion, spiritual values, communal resilience, and national sovereignty over Western-style individual liberalism. Iranian women generally rarely measure their dignity or fulfillment against Western feminist standards; for the majority, meaning and empowerment derive from their central role as the emotional and moral foundation of the family, educators of the next generation, and active participants in society's survival under prolonged external pressures. Nevertheless, many Iranian women are highly accomplished professionals — doctors, engineers, scientists, academics, entrepreneurs, and artists — who have advanced Iran's development while remaining committed to their own cultural and religious framework, often viewing that framework as a source of strength rather than constraint.

Thus, while the Western image highlights genuine challenges and dissenting voices, it frequently underrepresents the lived experience of most Iranian women who navigate, embrace, and draw power from their society's values, resulting in a por-

trayal that feels incomplete to those inside the culture.

**What historical, political, and cultural factors have contributed to the frequent depiction of Iranian women in Western narratives as “oppressed” or “subjugated”?**

The root cause is simple and well-known: since 1979, Iran chose sovereignty over subservience and expelled Western control from its soil. From that moment, and especially after many other types of instruments of pressure on Iran have failed, the Iranian woman ceased to be seen as a woman and became instead a propaganda weapon against the Islamic Republic. The more resilient and accomplished Iranian women proved to be — carrying their families and nation through decades of crippling sanctions, terrorist attacks, and hybrid warfare — the more urgently a part of the Western institutions needed to portray them as broken and miserable. A strong, devout, family-centered woman who finds meaning in her faith and her people's resistance is the living refutation of the Western liberal order's claim to universality.

Thus, many Western reports, documentaries, and NGO campaigns obsessively focus on hijab/chador, custody laws, or individual dissenters while systematically ignoring the millions of women who freely choose their way of life and who would fight to defend it. This selective framing is neither accidental nor journalistic; it is psychological warfare. It serves three goals: (1) to demoralize Iranians by suggesting their mothers and daughters are ashamed of their identity, (2) to justify continued aggression by presenting Iran as a pre-modern prison rather than a civilization with its own valid answers, and (3) to prevent Western publics from ever seeing in Iranian women a mirror that might cause them to question their own society's spiritual emptiness and family collapse. Iranian women are not “oppressed” by their values; they are empowered by them in ways that Western women, atomized by hyper-individualism, can

scarcely comprehend. That is precisely why a specific Western narrative must keep them veiled — not by cloth, but by lies.

**How have Western foreign policies and economic sanctions influenced the formation of negative narratives about Iranian women?**

Western sanctions and foreign policies also target the Iranian society's core: the woman as mother, wife, and daughter, knowing she bears the heaviest burden alongside her man. This pressure, instead of breaking her, has forged her into an unshakeable mountain of resilience that has held the nation upright for decades. Recognizing this strength, Iran's adversaries shifted strategy: unable to defeat her endurance, they chose to distort her image abroad, as I have already mentioned above. They deliberately spotlight only hijab, arrests, or individual suffering while silencing her real role as educator, scientist, doctor, engineer, farmer, and the quiet pillar sustaining families under siege. Thus, economic warfare became psychological warfare: portraying Iranian women as helpless victims serves to demoralize the Iranian people and justify

continued aggression. The negative narrative is not accidental; it is a calculated weapon aimed at the heart of Iran's resistance: its women.

**In what ways might Western media projects and academic research be directed to support a particular image of Iranian women?**

Many Western media projects and academic studies on Iranian women receive funding from governments, think-tanks, or NGOs that have explicit geopolitical interests in relation to Iran, which naturally inclines the research toward conclusions that align with those interests — typically emphasizing oppression and the need for external intervention. Researchers and journalists working within these funded frameworks are aware that findings highlighting Iranian women's agency, voluntary adherence to cultural norms, or societal contributions are far less likely to receive continued support or wide dissemination, creating a structural selection bias that favors the “victimized woman” frame. While it is unfair and inaccurate to label all Western coverage as deliberately biased — since genuinely independent and nuanced work does exist and occa-



Two female Iranian scientists sit in a booth that displays their achievements during the 10th exhibition of laboratory equipment and chemicals in Tehran, Iran, on December 10, 2022.

● EFE



The more resilient and accomplished Iranian women proved to be — carrying their families and nation through decades of crippling sanctions, terrorist attacks, and hybrid warfare — the more urgently a part of the Western institutions needed to portray them as broken and miserable. A strong, devout, family-centered woman who finds meaning in her faith and her people's resistance is the living refutation of the Western liberal order's claim to universality.

sionally reaches wide audiences — the most generously funded and heavily promoted content consistently reinforces the same narrow narrative, shaping global public perception far more than the smaller, less-resourced counter-examples.

**How have Western historical and cultural narratives about Middle Eastern women shaped Western and international audiences' perceptions?**

The way most Western and international audiences perceive Middle Eastern women is almost entirely shaped by the information they receive through media, books, documentaries, films, and social media, especially when they have never visited the region or met its people in person. In the absence of direct experience, public opinion naturally mirrors what is repeatedly shown or told, filtered through the education, critical discernment, and pre-existing beliefs of each individual. These perceptions are further influenced by who funds and controls the dominant sources: governments, think tanks, media owners, or platforms that selectively amplify certain stories (often those emphasizing oppression or exoticism) while marginalizing others.

As a result, Middle Eastern women tend to be seen primarily through recurring campaigns and narratives rather than through the complexity of their daily lives, aspirations, or societal roles. Thus, for the majority who rely on mediated information, historical Orientalist imagery and modern selective framing continue to define the lens — sometimes accurately highlighting real challenges, but more often reducing diverse women across an entire region to a single, simplified stereotype.

**Based on field research and the real-life experiences of Iranian women, what discrepancies exist between Western media portrayals and the realities of women's lives in Iran?**

Field research and direct interactions with Iranian women consistently reveal a significant gap between Western media portrayals and everyday reality.



portrayals and everyday reality. While Western coverage often reduces Iranian women to symbols of oppression — focusing almost exclusively on hijab enforcement, protests, or legal restrictions — most women encountered in homes, workplaces, and public spaces describe themselves first as mothers and, at the same time, professionals and proud bearers of cultural traditions such as Nowruz and Hafez poetry, leading lives filled with music, humor, friendship, and ambition that feel universally relatable. These women are doctors, diplomats, engineers, teachers, artists, and entrepreneurs who navigate the same daily joys and frustrations

as women elsewhere — raising children, sharing coffee with friends, celebrating family milestones — yet they do so under intensified pressures caused by decades of sanctions, political isolation, and external threats that affect the entire population. This context fosters a distinctive resilience: many consciously see themselves not only as guardians of their families but also as quiet defenders of their nation's independence, a role rarely acknowledged in dominant Western narratives. Consequently, the prevailing media image risks appearing one-dimensional to those with firsthand experience because it seldom captures the warmth and layered identity of

ordinary Iranian women who, despite real challenges and occasional disagreements with specific policies, largely reject the label of “oppressed” and express pride in both their faith-based values and their contributions to society.

**How can Western narratives, driven by political or ideological motivations, distort or oversimplify the reality of Iranian women's lives?** Western media and advocacy campaigns often reduce Iranian women to a single archetype — either fully oppressed victims of the hijab laws and theocratic rule or, in some counter-narratives, romanticized symbols of resistance. This binary ignores

the diversity of lived experiences, including urban professional women in northern Tehran, for example, who voluntarily wear stylish hijab, rural and working-class women for whom mandatory veiling is less contested than economic hardship, religious women who see the chador as empowerment, and secular feminists who oppose it. Selective imagery (almost always the morality police or protest arrests) and heavy reliance on exiled or diaspora voices amplify the most dramatic cases while marginalizing the majority who navigate daily life with pragmatic compromises. Funding from governments, think-tanks, and NGOs with explicit anti-Iran

policy goals further incentivizes framing that justifies sanctions or regime-change rhetoric, even when those policies objectively worsen the economic conditions that most affect ordinary women.

**Drawing on your perspectives, how can independent and field-based narratives offer a more accurate representation of Iranian women and influence global understanding?** Long-term, multilingual field research by scholars with no institutional hostility toward Iran from different parts of the world — such as East Asia, Latin America, India, the African continent, or neutral European countries — may document the full spec-

trum of facts, constraints, and adaptation that Iranian women actually experience. When these studies are published in open-access formats, translated into multiple languages, and amplified through academic networks rather than politicized media, they gradually displace the cartoon versions dominant in Western discourse. Over time, this evidence-based approach forces policymakers, journalists, and activists to acknowledge internal complexity, reduces the domestic backlash against “foreign interference,” and gives Iranian women themselves more nuanced tools to argue for reform on their own terms, while preserving their traditional values.

# Women rewrote Iranian music

## PERSPECTIVE

The daily existence of women in Iran is a reflection of the intricate interplay between opportunities and constraints; a milieu that both furnishes the possibility of cultivation and participation and simultaneously confronts structural, social, and cultural challenges. Contemporary women, endowed with diverse roles within the family, the workplace, and society, encounter realities that at times put the constraints in the spotlight and at times exhibit their capabilities and inventiveness. The analysis of these realities not only offers a more exact depiction of the condition of women but also reveals how laws, traditions, and public culture configure their daily lives. In the early decades following the Islamic Revolution, many women interested in music discovered their future trajectories in the instruction and performance of non-vocal instruments. The piano, violin, santur, and guitar became sanctuaries for young women, enabling them both to articulate their emotions and to obtain an intellectual share of this art within the pedagogical environment. Amid this landscape, the name of Lily Afshar emerged as one of the most resplendent figures of Iranian music; a woman who arose from Iranian music schools and became the first woman in the world to receive the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in classical guitar. She, who taught for years at the University of Memphis in the United States, constituted through her virtuosity and her syncretic perspective — combining Iranian and Western musical traditions — an inspirational paradigm for a new generation of female instrumentalists. Her legacy demonstrated that geographical boundaries cannot impede the cultivation of Iranian talent.

**Pedagogical trajectory, professionalization of women in performance** In subsequent years, the instruction of music for women expanded more than before. Schools and faculties of music received a substantial number of female students who sought mastery of instruments, theory, and composition. This progression induced the gradual normalization of women's presence in orchestras and musical ensembles. Female instrumentalists became present in official orchestras, classical ensembles, and even in the domain of traditional music. Their presence beside men transformed the societal perception of women's musical aptitude. At this juncture, the female instrumentalist was no longer solely a pupil relegated



Khonyagaran-e Mehr, an all-female Iranian orchestra, is one of many groups formed in the country in recent years with strong participation by women. ● HONAR ONLINE

to a corner of the classroom, but a member of a professional ensemble who stood upon the stage and possessed a share of live performance. **Vocal performance, women-only concerts** One noteworthy pathway involved the establishment of women-only concerts; an experience that received considerable attention and revealed a portion of the latent potential of female vocalists. Within this realm, Simin Ghanem is a salient figure; a vocalist who, endowed with a memorable and meticulously cultivated voice trained within the tradition of classical Iranian music, held women-only concerts at Vahdat Hall. Although these performances unfolded within specific frameworks, they possessed substantial symbolic significance, for they indicated that the voice of a woman, even under restrictive conditions, could resonate within an official cultural space. Numerous young women, upon witnessing Simin Ghanem on stage, acquired hope that they might pursue music with greater seriousness. Moreover, these women-only concerts occasionally obtained social and cultural functions; a portion of these performances was conducted for charitable aims or in support of women's cultural initiatives. This progression endowed women's music, in addition to its artistic dimension, with a social and participatory aspect.

**Entrance into orchestral conducting; a watershed in transformations** In the last decade, one of the most consequential transformations

in Iranian music has been the entrance of women into the realm of orchestral conducting. This role had remained for years the exclusive domain of men, yet now young female conductors have emerged who possess an innovative perspective toward performance and musical administration. A prominent example is Paniz Faryousafi, an instrumentalist and conductor who, from March 20, 2025, to March 20, 2026, conducted the Tehran Symphony Orchestra. Her performance constituted a symbolic point within the history of contemporary Iranian music because, for the first time, a woman stood as conductor at the helm of the most national musical institution of the country. In this performance, compositions by female composers were also played, and this itself signified a structural transformation in the orientation

of Iran's official musical culture. Orchestral conducting is not merely a technical position but an emblem of trust, administration, and decisional authority within the artistic structure. When a woman attains this position, she, in a sense, reconfigures the longstanding narrative of the marginalization of women in the musical sphere.

**Obstacles, opportunities, and transformational movements** Despite the advancements, structural challenges remain persistent. Many female musicians speak of the paucity of performance opportunities, the absence of financial support, and the neglect of their works in official media. Although women possess extensive presence in music schools and universities, their share in official productions and major musical projects remains limited.



From left to right: Lily Afshar, Paniz Faryousafi, and Simin Ghanem ● IRNA

Ultimately, the evolutionary course of women in Iranian music after the Revolution may be regarded as a synthesis of constraints, exertions, and innovations. From the days when women's music sought refuge in music schools in silence to the contemporary moment in which female conductors stand in grand orchestral halls, a protracted path has been traversed.

Nevertheless, positive tendencies are incontrovertible. In recent years, the growth of advanced musical education among women has increased remarkably. Many distinguished professors of today are female graduates who work in fields such as composition, musicology, and conducting. Furthermore, the digital sphere and social networks have provided novel possibilities for visibility and audience engagement. Numerous female musicians utilize this platform for instruction, online performances, the presentation of their works, and international collaborations. This tendency naturally circumvents official boundaries and creates a more equitable opportunity for presence.

**Future horizon; from stage to structure** If the present trajectory persists, one may envision a more luminous future for women in Iranian music — a future in which the presence of women is not confined to performance or instruction but extends to production, management, and cultural policymaking. In recent years, international collaborations between Iranian and foreign female artists have increased. Some Iranian women musicians have participated in multinational projects, and their works have been performed at global festivals. This international presence not only elevates the individual prestige of the artists but also contributes to reinforcing the image of Iranian women within the global cultural sphere. Ultimately, the evolutionary course of women in Iranian music after the Revolution may be regarded as a synthesis of constraints, exertions, and innovations. From the days when women's music sought refuge in music schools in silence to the contemporary moment in which female conductors stand in grand orchestral halls, a protracted path has been traversed. Names such as Lily Afshar, Simin Ghanem, and Paniz Faryousafi constitute merely three emblems among dozens of female artists who have each, in their own measure, facilitated the path for others. Their presence exhibited that talent, perseverance, and devotion to art can surpass every impediment. The female musicians of contemporary Iran are not merely continuers of the past but recreators of a new visage of music — a visage formed upon capability, knowledge, and creativity — that can, in the future, contribute more substantively to elevating the quality of the nation's music and to realizing cultural and gender equity.

The article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.



# FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup: Iran's Tavassoli vows fightback after opening-day defeat to Brazil

## Sports Desk

Iran goalkeeper Farzaneh Tavassoli promised her team would bounce back from the opening-day defeat to Brazil at the FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup in the Philippines. The Asian powerhouse endured a tough start in Group D of the inaugural event, losing 4-1 to eight-time Copa América champion Brazil on Sunday. Brazil applied early pressure, with Debora Vanin's shot deflecting off Tavassoli and onto the post before Elham Anajfeh produced a superb diving challenge to prevent Taty from finishing into an empty net. Iran registered its first shot on target in the seventh minute, when Mahsa Kamali's powerful long-range effort was tipped away by Bianca. Brazil's persistence paid off in the 15th minute as Emily picked out Ana Luiza with a fine pass, the latter lifting the ball past Tavassoli for the opener.

The South Americans doubled their lead two minutes later, this time Ana Luiza turning provider with a back-heel for Vanin to strike home. Iran's task became more difficult a minute after the interval when Ana Luiza teed up Emily to smash a shot high into the top corner. Emily added another in the 24th minute before Kamali pulled one back a minute later. Despite the defeat, Tavassoli believes her team has what it takes to progress to the quarterfinals. "We gave it our all, and I'm glad I made a couple of good saves to help the team stay in the match," the Iranian skipper said. "We will try to be the best version of ourselves for the next two games. We will go onto the court with high motivation and focus to deliver a better performance than we did today." The two-time Asian champion will take on Panama on Wednesday and hopes to still be in contention for a top-two finish

when facing Italy – who demolished Panama 17-0 earlier in the day – next Sunday. "I can only promise that in the next two matches, we will fight with all our strength and focus to advance to the next round. Our team has the necessary capacity and motivation, and we are confident that we can achieve good results," Tavassoli added. Meanwhile, Iran head coach Shahrzad Mozaffar was pleased with how her players "went toe-to-toe" with the South American heavyweight. "We have to accept that Brazil is the best team in the world, and they have played many friendlies in their preparation for this tournament. Facing a team of this caliber was a valuable opportunity for us to gauge our level and identify our strengths and weaknesses," she said. "My players demonstrated with motivation, commitment, and remarkable unity that they can



● FFIRI

compete with the world's best teams. Every player on the court gave their all, and a fighting spir-

it and team camaraderie were completely evident. We will have precise planning

for our next two games, and we see every match as a lesson and an experience."

## 25th Summer Deaflympics:

# Siahvashi wins freestyle gold as Iran secures wrestling team titles



## Sports Desk

Mohammad Siahvashi headlined Iran's medal hunt at the Tokyo Summer Deaflympics on Monday, capturing the 57kg freestyle wrestling gold. The Iranian defeated opponents from Bulgaria and Armenia before overcoming Kazakhstan's Gabit Yeszhanov 7-2 in the final showdown.



Freestyle wrestler Mohammad Siahvashi celebrates with the Iranian flag after winning the 57kg gold medal at the Summer Deaflympics in Tokyo, Japan, on November 24, 2025.

● MNA

Siahvashi's triumph capped an emphatic wrestling campaign for the country, which secured both the freestyle and Greco-Roman team titles at the multi-sport event. Meanwhile, Kayvan Rostamabadi (65kg), Abolfazl Zohrevand (74kg), and Mohammad Qamarpour (125kg) settled for silver in their respective weight classes, while Erfan Sattari bagged a consolation bronze in the 97kg event, as Iran added five medals to the six won in Greco-Roman competition. Meysam Dezfuli (87kg) and Abuzar Rabizadeh (97kg) were Iran's Greco-Roman gold medalists on Saturday,

with Mahdi Bakhshi securing silver in the 67kg class. Sadeq Abolvafaei (60kg), Mohammad Zaratpisheh (77kg), and Mohammadreza Sha'bani suffered semifinal setbacks to finish with joint bronze medals. Elsewhere, Milad Sadeqzadeh took Iran's medal tally to 30 after claiming bronze in karate with an 8-0 victory over his Malaysian opponent in the men's -60kg event. Sara Adria also secured a kumite bronze following a narrow 7-6 defeat to Japan's Ryo Ogura in the women's -61kg semifinals. Zahra Zoleikani and Mahdi Poursmaeil delivered dou-

ble gold for Iran in taekwondo on Sunday, triumphing in the women's -57kg and men's -58kg divisions respectively. Iran is represented by 83 athletes – including 19 women – competing in football, freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling, athletics, karate, taekwondo, shooting, judo, bowling, badminton, table tennis, swimming, and beach volleyball at the 25th edition of the Summer Deaflympics. Iran achieved its best medals-table finish at the previous edition in Caxias do Sul, Brazil, placing fourth with 14 golds, 12 silvers, and 14 bronzes.

## Iran confirms women's roster for World Handball Championship

## Sports Desk

French head coach Ana Seabra has unveiled Iran's 16-woman squad for the upcoming IHF Women's World Handball Championship, which will kick off on Wednesday in Germany and the Netherlands. Fatemeh Khalili, Zahra Afshari, Mina Vatanparast, Sanaz Rajabi, Hanieh Karimi, Fatemeh Merrikhi, Hediye Hafez, Setareh Rahmani, Mojgan Qahremani, Nastaran Godarzi, Hadiseh Noruzi,

Atiyeh Shahsavari, Arezou Kiani Ara, Bahar Izadgasht, Aseman Badvi, and Leila Hosseini will represent the country at the 27th edition of the sport's flagship international event. Iran will open its Group B campaign against Switzerland in the Dutch city of 's-Hertogenbosch on Thursday, before facing Hungary on Saturday and Senegal on Monday. The top three teams in the group will advance to the main-round phase, while

the bottom side will compete for 25th–32nd places in the President's Cup. Iran, which finished fourth at the Asian Championship last year to secure its berth at the tournament, will be making its third appearance at the competition. The team enters the event fresh off a historic bronze medal at the recently concluded Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, where Seabra's side defeated Uzbekistan 29-25 in the third-place match.



● IRNA

## AFC Women's Champions League: Khatoon hammered by Wuhan Jiangda, crashes out in group stage

## Sports Desk

Bam Khatoon suffered an early exit from the AFC Women's Champions League after a 4-0 defeat against defending champion Wuhan Jiangda in Group B on Sunday. Even a one-goal defeat would have been enough for the Iranian champion to progress to the quarterfinals of the Asian elite clubs' competition for a second year in a row, but Sunday's setback in Wuhan saw Marziyeh Jafari's side finish bottom of the group table with three points. The group host topped the standings with seven points, three ahead of PFC Nasaf of Uzbekistan and India's East Bengal FC. Wuhan Jiangda forced Bam Khatoon onto the back foot from the start with Dai Chenying's close-range effort in the fourth minute before Deng



Bam Khatoon's Sara Didar (8) is seen in action against Wuhan Jiangda during a Group B game at the AFC Women's Champions League in Wuhan, China, on November 23, 2025.

● AFC

Mengye narrowly missed the target 10 minutes later. Bam Khatoon goalkeeper Raha Yazdani kept her team in the game with a series of superb stops – denying Dai Chenying again in the 15th minute and producing two solid saves to stop Kim Hye-ri and Song Fei's efforts from distance. The breakthrough finally came in first half stoppage time when Wuhan Jiangda capitalized on with Mavis Owusu rising highest to nod home a pre-

cise cross from Song Fei, which slipped the clutches of Yazdani. Wuhan Jiangda nearly doubled their advantage just before the half-time whistle, with Deng Mengye denied from point-blank range by another excellent save from Yazdani. Bam Khatoon fell further behind in the 50th minute when Song Fei delivered a pin-point cross to Owusu, who applied a composed finish into the bottom right corner. The Iranian side tried to respond through Mona Hamou-

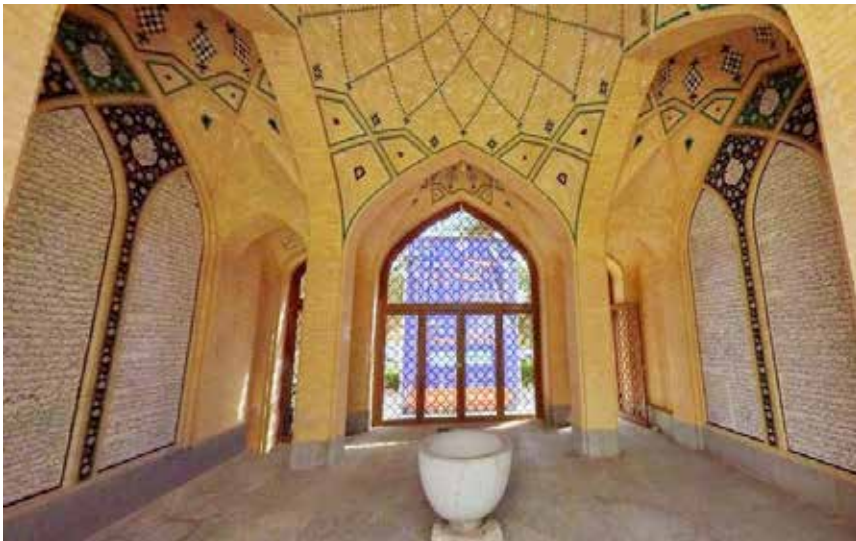
di, who forced Wuhan Jiangda keeper Ding Xuan into a save but the momentum never shifted as it conceded again five minutes later. Song Fei was again the orchestrator, delivering a cross from the left for Deng Mengye to power home a header into an unattended net after Yazdani had come off her line in an attempt to clear the danger. Wuhan Jiangda added a fourth in the 88th minute after Deng Mengye struck the bar with a headed attempt with the rebound falling kindly for Zhao Jingyi to slot home from close range to seal the victory.



# Poetry, architecture shape Tekyieh Valeh’s fame

Iranica Desk

Isfahan, with its ancient history and rich culture, has always been the cradle of Iran’s art, literature, and philosophy. Within this historic city, the Takht-e Foulad Cemetery is not only the resting place of religious and mystical figures but also a guardian of cultural and artistic heritage. The tomb of Aqa Mohammad Kazem Valeh, also known as Tekyieh Valeh, with its unique architecture and artistic value, presents a special fusion of poetry, calligraphy, and Qajar-era architectural design. This historic Tekyieh (religious gathering place) stands as a memorial to the prominent poet and calligrapher of Isfahan, whose life and works reflect the literary and artistic culture of 13th-century Iran. According to historical accounts, this site was a literary and cultural gathering place for poets and artists of the time. The turquoise tilework, plaster inscriptions of poems, and stone columns adorned with Eslimi motifs greatly enhance its artistic and architectural significance, according to Mehr News Agency. The gravestone of Aqa Mohammad Kazem Valeh is inscribed in his own Ta’liq script and is considered a unique example of historical Iranian calligraphy. It testifies to Valeh’s skill and serves as a reminder of his literary and artistic stature within Isfahan’s cultural community. Aqa Mohammad Kazem Valeh, who used the pen name Valeh, was born between 1145 and 1150 AH in Isfahan. He was a master of Ta’liq and Nasta’liq scripts, attaining the rank of master after studying in Iraq. Valeh was also a distinguished poet, and his collection of poems remains a lasting legacy. His mastery of art and literature earned him a special position during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar. In addition to calligraphy and



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poetry, he possessed significant knowledge in Arabic sciences, literature, philosophy, mysticism, and mathematics. On the western side of the Tekyieh, there are rooms that served as his residence and place of worship. The Tekyieh is located in the western part of Takht-e Foulad, adjacent to the Rukn-al-Molk Mosque. This building was constructed by Mirza Mohammad Hossein Khan Sadr Esfahani, then governor of Isfahan, in honor of Valeh. The architecture of the Tekyieh

features a brick dome adorned with turquoise tilework, eight stone columns decorated with Eslimi motifs, and plasterwork inscribed with poems by contemporary poets. These elements reflect the precision and elegance of Qajar-era architecture and the fusion of art and literature. The gravestone, written in Valeh’s own Ta’liq script, stands out as one of Iran’s most valuable calligraphic works. Visiting this historic Tekyieh offers an educational and impactful experience of Iran’s history and culture and serves as a

tribute to Valeh’s artistic and literary legacy. It also reflects the collaborative environment of poets, calligraphers, and artists of 19th-century Isfahan, a society where art and scholarship were deeply intertwined. Preserving its architectural authenticity and cultural values, the Tekyieh continues to welcome enthusiasts of Iranian history, art, and culture. It is regarded as one of Isfahan’s prominent cultural and tourist attractions, recalling the grandeur of art and literature during the Qajar period and its

heritage for future generations. The Tekyieh also highlights the enduring influence of Valeh’s work on contemporary Iranian calligraphy and poetry, ensuring that his legacy continues to inspire scholars and artists alike. In addition to Tekyieh Valeh, Isfahan is home to several other historical religious and cultural sites that showcase similar architectural and artistic features. The Chehel Sotoun Palace features intricate tilework and calligraphy, while the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque demonstrates exquisite harmony between ar-

chitecture and ornamental arts. Similarly, the Vank Cathedral in the Armenian quarter exhibits a blend of artistic styles that reflect Isfahan’s diverse cultural history. The Ali Qapu Palace, with its majestic terrace and fine murals, and the Jaame Mosque of Isfahan, with its layered architectural evolution spanning centuries, further illustrate the city’s rich heritage. These sites, along with Tekyieh Valeh, provide a comprehensive understanding of Isfahan’s artistic, literary, and intellectual legacy.

# Ilam’s jewelry reflects centuries of artistic tradition

Iranica Desk

The jewelry of ancient Iran has captivated the hearts and attention of people worldwide. Experts regard Iranian jewelry as unique exemplars of creativity that highlight the extraordinary craftsmanship of their makers. Ancient Iranian tribes inhabiting the Persian plateau around 200 BCE began crafting jewelry using seeds and colorful beads, reflecting their deep interest in decoration and adornment. Jewelry making saw significant advancements during the Achaemenid dynasty, with gold pieces becoming common. Armlets, bracelets, and rings emerged as popular adornments during that era. For centuries, the craft of traditional jewelry making has been one of the most celebrated handicrafts in Ilam and its surrounding cities. Like many other regions, Ilam’s women have always valued their beauty and appearance, often expressing their family and social status



through distinctive choices of makeup and jewelry. Historically, women wore makeup and jewelry designed to enhance their natural beauty and emphasize their features. They adorned their ears, noses, necks, hands, and feet with various rings and captivating earrings. Additionally, some women occasionally bore tattoos on parts of their

faces as part of their traditional adornment practices. The jewelry pieces of Ilam are predominantly crafted from colorful beads, stones, and gemstones indigenous to the region. Some distinguished examples include Sineriz or bib necklaces and headbands made from Pahlavi coins — the greater the number of coins, the higher the

wearer’s rank. These pieces are known as Haft Lireh or Panj Lire. Another example is Gol Kif, crafted from tiny glass beads and dried clove flowers, often infused with musk, used to fragrance and decorate dresses. Lasari pieces are used to embellish the sides of women’s headbands and hats and feature beads typically made of jade and turquoise.

Other common jewelry includes necklaces, earrings, brooches used to fasten garments or belts, anklets called Pawang, bracelets known as Desings, rings named Clowang, and Kohl holders or Sormehdan, traditionally made from goat skin to contain kohl eye makeup. While the practice of traditional jewelry making in Ilam has

diminished somewhat today, it remains an enduring symbol of the region’s rich cultural heritage. The craft exemplifies not only artistic excellence but also the cultural identity and social values that have been cherished by the Ilam community throughout history, continuing to inspire pride and appreciation among locals and visitors alike.



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# Inside musical 'Oliver Twist' with its director

## No shortcuts in theater, grand productions demand big commitment



By Hamideh Hosseini  
Staff writer

### INTERVIEW

*The musical 'Oliver Twist,' masterfully directed by Hossein Parsaei and brought to life under the production of Jalil Kia, has been captivating audiences since October 2025 at the Tennis Stadium of Enqelab Complex, drawing more than 80,000 spectators to its vibrant performances. This grand production features the talents of Hootan Shakiba, Behnoush Tabatabai, Banipal Shoomoon, and Amirkaveh Ah-aninjan, complemented by guest appearances from Siamak Ansari, Kazem Sayahi, and over a hundred other performers and artists, each adding their own spark to the tapestry of the show. In this interview, Parsaei opens a window into his artistic journey, unpacking the state of musical theater in Iran, the delicate economics of private-stage productions, the formidable challenges of mounting large-scale performances, and the inspiration that compelled him to breathe new life into 'Oliver Twist.'*

**IRAN DAILY: What led you to bring 'Oliver Twist' back after eight years?**

**PARSAEI:** I believe every director should revisit their own body of work from time to time. Over the past years, I worked on two productions based on the 'Shahnameh,' 'Esfandiar's Seven Labors' and 'The Battle of Rostam and Sohrab,' and gained new experiences. I felt it was the right moment to approach 'Oliver Twist' with a fresh perspective. This revival is neither a mere repeat of the 2017 production nor a nostalgic exercise; it's an opportunity to engage with today's audience, whose generation and expectations have shifted. I, too, have changed over these years, and naturally, that evolution shows up in the staging.

**Looking further back, where did your interest in musical theater begin?**

I've been passionate about music since my teenage years. At the time, access to musicals was extremely limited, but the few animated films and movies with a musical vibe were deeply inspiring. Later, as international works became more accessible, I pursued this interest more actively. I've always wanted to create theater with a poetic and musical language. For me, a musical is not merely a performance form;

it's an emotional language to connect with human feelings. Even in my socially themed plays, I've tried to integrate rhythm, music, and a kind of musical expression into the structure.

**Your career has been diverse. How did it lead you toward large-scale, so-called 'big productions'?**

Theater has always been, for me, a collective, dynamic endeavor grounded in collaboration. I'm drawn to grand stages, live music, ensemble movement, and intricate design, but this is not about extravagance. Quality matters more than scale. In truth, professional-level musicals cannot happen without extensive technical resources, suitable venues, and precise stage machinery. Famous actors aren't mandatory, though they can help attract audiences. Theater is inherently costly, and we cannot always rely on government funding. The private sector must take risks. When producers like Jalil Kia or Seyed Mahmoud Shobeiri commit, it's not just an economic venture, it's a form of social responsibility.

**Some say you boldly draw from international versions. How do you define your approach to adaptation?**

I've always been transparent about drawing inspiration from successful global productions. During my studies, we had no academic resources on musical theater. When I saw a work succeed internationally, it seemed logical to ask: Why not adapt it for our culture and audience? This happens worldwide. With 'Oliver Twist,' we openly acknowledge it's an adaptation of the original. The text is translated, then rewritten, and finally adapted to our language, culture, and geography. Works like 'Les Misérables' and 'Oliver Twist' are universal because they speak to humanity, not a specific place. For me, adaptation is a cultural dialogue with the world, not mere replication.

**The cast for this revival is completely different from 2017. Why did you change the actors?**

Time brings change. Many of the original cast members were unavailable or engaged in other projects. This production also honors the late Atila Pesyani, who played a pivotal role in shaping the first Oliver and encouraging me to revive it. Every new staging starts from zero; even with the same script, the experience differs. This season features Hootan Shakiba, Siamak Ansari, Kazem Sayahi, Behnoush Tabatabai, and Banipal Shoomoon alongside younger actors. This new ensemble

injects fresh energy. For me, the actor doesn't need to be a celebrity, it's crucial they are "theatrical" and can embody the role. If the actor can't deliver the part, fame won't help. In this cast, everyone is in the right place, and a shared language has emerged.

**In general, what challenges does producing a musical in Iran present?**

Musical theater in Iran exceeds the usual capacities of our theater scene. We lag in financial resources, technical infrastructure, suitable venues, training, and formal support. The government cannot fund or manage such productions, and few private groups are willing to take the risk. There's no structured academic training for musical theater here; most work is intuitive and experiential. Artists study foreign examples, observe, and adapt based on their capabilities. Moreover, Iranian audiences are not accustomed to forms like full-scale opera. You can't perform a three-hour opera thirty nights in a row expecting full houses. Musicals, blending drama, story, character, song, and melody, make it easier for audiences to connect.

**You've long spoken about the economics of private theater in Iran. Do you think theater today needs more artistic creation or cultural industrialization?**

I think Iranian theater first needs awareness, artists' awareness of society and audiences, and the government's awareness of culture's importance. Choosing a play must be rooted in understanding why it matters now and what impact it can have. Six months of rehearsal only to face empty seats is heartbreaking. In professional theater, the process is clear: We create for an audience seeking innovation, not clichés or ideology. Theater is a two-way ritual: The audience is affected, and the artist is influenced in turn. For theater to survive as a serious profession, we need to develop performance spaces, support independent groups, and design an art economy that allows theater to stand on its own without government subsidies.

**A recurring critique is the high cost of your productions. How do you respond?**

I don't see this as a negative critique, it's inherent to this type of work. Cinema routinely involves private investors; why should theater be different? If private funding allows us to build a venue, employ dozens of artists, and produce



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high-quality work, it deserves support, not criticism.

People say my shows are expensive. Yes, they are, because I don't cut corners. Quality comes at a price. Just as you pay more for fine clothing or food, the same applies to art. In music, people pay thousands for a concert ticket without questioning the cost, they choose it. In musical theater, over a hundred performers rehearse for months, massive sets are built, lighting and sound meet professional standards. These costs must be covered. I receive no government funding; my only support is the audience who buys tickets and chooses theater. It's time to change outdated views: A grand, quality production is not indulgence, it's professionalism, seriousness, and respect for the audience.

**This time, the show is staged at the Tennis Stadium of Enqelab Complex. Why this space?**

Honestly, we had no alternative. No theater in Tehran has the technical capacity for a production of this scale. Our set spans nearly 900 square meters with a height of about 15 meters, and over 200 people participate in the production. Standard theaters cannot accommodate this machinery, scene changes, and foot traffic. Like last year's 'The Battle of Rostam and Sohrab,' we converted an open space into a performance venue. It wasn't simple, from designing and installing a temporary ceiling and heating system to constructing the stage, everything was handled by the producer and technical team. Despite challenges, weather delays, and external factors, the crew worked passionately. Their love and sense of social responsibility carried the project forward. Now, when audiences enter, they no longer feel they're on a tennis court, they see a grand theater crafted for this production.

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**One of the charms of 'Oliver Twist' is its large cast of children and teens. How do you approach working with them?**

I've trained in creative theater and mentorship at the Iran's Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) and specialize in teaching young performers. For the latest production, just as in 2017, we ran a long and meticulous selection process. Over 300 children and teens auditioned, and about 40 were chosen. For key roles like Oliver and Dodger, we cast two performers each to reduce pressure. These kids undergo months of training, including movement, singing, psychological guidance, and theater etiquette, with families fully involved. Anyone filming backstage would see their professionalism, from arrival to costume changes, warm-ups, receiving props, stage entrances and exits, and rehearsals. For these 40 children, the show is a rare educational opportunity and unforgettable experience.

**Your set and staging are often described as "grand" or even "cinematic." How important was the visual and technical aspect in 'Oliver Twist'?**

Performing on a large scale for a big audience requires exploiting every visual and auditory element to maintain grandeur and amaze the spectators. This is true for all productions but especially for big productions. In 'Oliver Twist,' music plays a central role. The songs are from the 1968 cinematic version composed by Lionel Bart, translated and adapted into Persian while keeping the original melodies. Technically, this is challenging because the words must fit the rhythm and notes perfectly. Some music is pre-recorded, while some is performed live. Soheil

Danesh Eshraghi's set design uses a massive revolving stage structure to create multiple locations, from the orphanage and Mr. Brownlow's house to London streets and Bill Sykes's famous café.

**Some critics argue your productions are overly lavish and have lost simplicity. Your thoughts?**

I started with "barebones theater," tin drums, school chairs, bed tents, my late father's clothing, and my late mother's makeup. I've worked across many genres: War, children's, puppetry, social, mythological, each with its own requirements. Choosing a large set or abundant props is always deliberate, not frivolous. Even 'Les Misérables' set, built from wooden fruit crates on a metal structure, was called "lavish" by some. In large-scale productions, grandeur does not equate to waste; it serves the world of the play. Each story, whether eighteenth-century London or 'The Battle of Rostam and Sohrab,' demands its own environment. My aim is always to create the best and most appropriate visual world given the resources.

**Finally, what's next? Will you work on another Iranian or mythological production?**

Absolutely. I've always been passionate about Iranian and mythological theater. After 'Esfandiar's Seven Labors' and 'The Battle of Rostam and Sohrab,' a research team has been developing 'The Legend of Siavash,' part of a mythological trilogy I envision. Simultaneously, I want to continue exploring musicals with Iranian and social stories. My goal is for the next generation of Iranian audiences to engage with their cultural heritage and identity through musical theater. This genre can bridge classical literature and contemporary expression. With support and continuity, Iranian theater can move closer to the place it deserves.



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