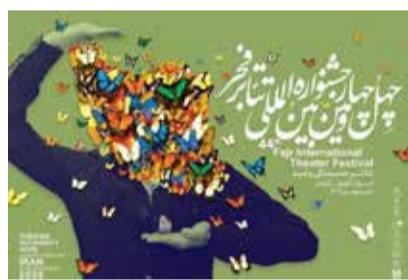


Minister calls theater vital for truth, survival of civilization

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Abbas Salehi on Saturday framed theater as a vital pillar for any civilization, calling the art form indispensable for uncovering truth and fostering critique during times of national crisis. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 44th Fajr International Theater Festival in the historic city of Kerman, Salehi laid out a sweeping vision of Iran's millennia-old affinity for narrative and performance.



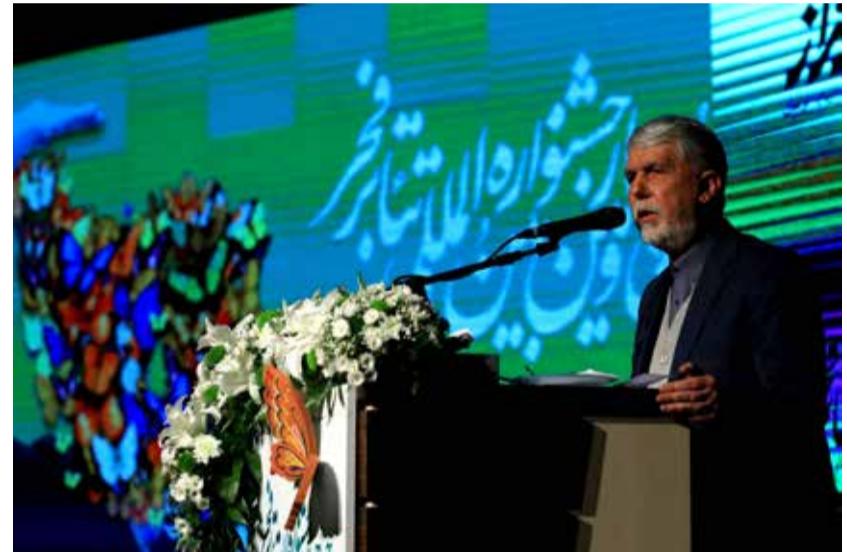
mance, IRNA reported. He said the country's ancient soil had always nurtured storytelling, from the tales of ancient Persia to contemporary stages. "Why has this land had so many stories over thousands of years?" Salehi asked the audience. He traced a direct line from storytellers in ancient Jundi Shapur, who recited narratives to treat the sick, to the great poet Attar and the hundreds of tales within the Masnavi. "Iran is a land of stories and performance," he stated. The minister argued that civilizations themselves are built and sustained through such narratives. He cited a newspaper from Iran's Constitutional Era, named 'Theater', which posited that education and civilization rest on three pillars: School, newspaper, and theater. "If a civilization is to form and develop, it needs the art of theater," Salehi asserted. He positioned theater as a crucial tool for



Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Abbas Salehi speaks at the opening ceremony of the 44th Fajr International Theater Festival in Kerman, on January 17, 2026.

● IRNA

societal introspection, particularly when nations face threats. "Where civilizations are threatened between endurance and decline, theater helps narrate the truth," Salehi said. He pointed to Iran's own "sacred defense" period – referring to the 1980-88 war with Iraq – and more recent conflicts as times when theater's role becomes paramount. The art form's second crucial function, he contended, is to foster essential dialogue and criticism. "A civilization without criticism rots from within like termites," Salehi warned, adding that theater prevents a nation or a society from internal decay by providing a genuine platform for expression.



The 44th Fajr International Theater Festival, which runs in Kerman and Teh-

ran until late January, hosted five major sections in Kerman this year.

Ammar Popular Festival to screen 300 films, framed as cultural 'counter-narrative'

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Ammar Popular Film Festival will screen 300 films in competition this year, the festival's executive secretary, Mohammad Hossein Sabouri said on Sunday, framing the event as a cultural rebuttal to Western criticism.

The event kicks off on January 22 at Tehran's Bahman Cinema, with daily screenings running until January 29, Defa Press reported.

The secretariat received over 3,040 submissions for its documentary, fiction, and music video categories.

Saeed Khorshidi, head of the festival's policy council, used a press conference to cast the gathering as a display of Iran's "cultural technology" and soft power.

He positioned it as a di-



rect challenge to narratives of a fatigued Iranian society.

"We invite those who try to portray Iranian society as tired and stagnant to see these works," Khorshidi stated.

The festival's thematic focus is firmly rooted in Iran's revolutionary narrative. Officials said it would "narrate the conquest" of the Iranian people, referencing the date of January 12, which marks the rally

A display of burned Qur'an pages is seen during a press conference for the 16th Ammar Popular Film Festival in Tehran, Iran, January 18, 2026.

● TASMIN

condemning the recent foreign-backed riots across the country. Khorshidi tied the event symbolically to Tehran's Abuzar Mosque, a site he said recalls the people's "awakening" against past "seditions" and a recent

arson attack by "rioters." He also cited the Leader's recent speech, arguing Iran now operates from a "higher level" than mere soft power. The festival, Khorshidi claimed, provides a "frame" to see the representation of Iran's combined hard and soft power, calling it a "counter-example" that invalidates claims by foreign and domestic enemies.

A special section titled "Iranian Dream" will showcase works by intellectuals, while a segment on the "12-Day War" – a reference to recent border conflicts – prompted such a volume of submissions that organizers considered holding two annual festivals.

The event will also feature two dedicated screenings for deaf audiences.

Iran to give fuel cards to foreign tourists for overland travel

Social Desk

Iran's government has agreed in principle to issue fuel cards to foreign tourists entering the country by private car, a senior tourism official said on Sunday, aiming to boost visitor numbers and spread economic benefits beyond major cities.

Moslem Shojaei, director-general of marketing and advertising at Iran's Tourism Ministry, said that the specialized fuel cards would be sold at international rates, not subsidized domestic prices.

He expects the scheme to be operational by the end of the current Iranian year in March 2026, ILNA reported.

"This tackles a key hurdle for overland tourism," Shojaei said. The move is part of a push to attract 15 million annual visitors. "We're turning to capacities that are lower-cost, more accessible, and more sustainable," he added. Iran shares land borders with



15 neighbors. Tourists driving in, often with families, stay longer and visit more destinations than air arrivals, Shojaei noted. "They stop in cities like Arak and use local services, which has a direct economic impact," he said. The plan, drafted with the Oil Ministry and the Planning and Budget Organization, recently cleared the government's economic commission. Final edits are now being made. The National Iranian Oil Products Distri-

bution Company will run the scheme.

Shojaei dismissed concerns about fuel smuggling, saying the globally-priced cards would curb, not encourage, illicit trade. "It makes no sense for a foreign tourist to use subsidized fuel," he said.

The initiative follows existing mechanisms for commercial trucks and buses. Shojaei argued it would ensure "subsidy justice" while generating hard currency and improving Iran's travel image abroad.

Ain al-Asad evacuation signals ...

Therefore, one of the key considerations for the US is that any aggression against Iran, or any operation involving the country, could trigger a response targeting this base. Consequently, the US has attempted to mitigate potential casualties and, as it's said, pull out the base.

However, reports also suggest that alternative facilities have been deployed to the base, featuring a reduced human presence. Regardless, the US will likely adopt similar precautionary measures for its various bases. It's evident that US forces in the region will move out more quickly from countries where local opposition to their presence is strong. This could be perceived as a signal that the US is concerned about Iranian retaliation should any action be taken by the US.

However, domestic conditions in Iraq also

appear to be a major factor in the base's evacuation, as political forces opposed to the presence can quickly react should the US undertake action against neighboring countries.

In its broader strategy, the US tends to avoid direct involvement in the defense activities of its allied countries in the region, preferring to hand over defense to those countries themselves. Yet, Iraq is an exception to this rule, and this principle has not necessarily driven the decision to evacuate Ain al-Asad.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has characterized this move as a sign of strengthened Iraqi independence and has welcomed the action. To what extent does this assessment align with the realities on the ground in Iraq, and what new opportunities and threats does it create

for Iran's national interests?

Iraq has established a strategic cooperation framework with the US, under which US combat forces in Iraq were intended to have a minimal presence, focusing instead on providing training on advanced technologies. Therefore, the withdrawal of these forces can also be seen as a step toward implementing this framework, as parliamentarians have repeatedly called for the departure of foreign forces, primarily US, allied, and occasionally Turkish forces. Parliament has consistently emphasized and continues to emphasize the implementation of this resolution, and the Iraqi government is obligated to respect and enforce parliamentary resolutions. Therefore, if the withdrawal is seen as part of the implementation of the Iraqi parliament's resolutions, it can certainly be interpreted as a positive sign of Iraq's

desire for independence.

For Iran, if this withdrawal is genuine and fully implemented, it will naturally reduce the threat to the Islamic Republic in this geographic area. However, the situation would be different if these troops were simply relocated to Syria or the Kurdistan Region, as that would be seen as a way of circumventing the Iraqi parliament's resolutions.

How do you analyze the recent meeting between the Iranian and Iraqi foreign ministers amid current domestic and social tensions in Iran? What messages does this meeting convey to domestic, regional, and international actors?

Most political factions in Iraq are unwilling to see Iraq become a source of conflict or, potentially, a tool for exerting pressure

on Iran. Therefore, the foreign minister's visit can be seen as a valuable opportunity for Baghdad to pronounce its policies and stances regarding this issue, especially as Trump continues to threaten the Islamic Republic of Iran. This visit can be a signal to the US regarding the potential escalation of tensions between Iran and Iraq, which could lead to the expansion of conflict to the entire region and parts of Iraqi territory that host US forces and could be subject to Iran's retaliatory measures. Furthermore, it will send a message to other countries in the region that if their territories or airspace become a venue for conflict against Iran, they could face repercussions. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a clear and constructive signal that other countries should also distance themselves from the effects of the current crisis.