



# Iran scraps competition in revamped Fajr visual arts festival

## Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance will overhaul the flagship Fajr Visual Arts Festival into a non-competitive national exhibition, senior official Aidin Mehdizadeh announced on Monday. The move marks a fundamental shift for the state-sponsored event, transforming the eighteenth edition from a traditional contest into a curated showcase of existing artistic output, a decision analysts view as an attempt to foster unity and show a broader "national celebration" of the arts, IRNA reported. Dubbed the "National Celebration of Visual Arts," the revamped festival will amalgamate publicly-held events, previously issued open calls, and specially curated projects from the current Persian calendar year. "We have taken this edition out of the

competition format," said Mehdizadeh, director general of the ministry's Visual Arts Office. He described the new structure as "multi-episodic," featuring a provincially-focused segment titled "My Homeland." The comprehensive event will stage exhibitions across Tehran and Iran's 31 provinces, displaying this aggregated annual "achievement." Provincial artistic directors are currently being appointed for the decentralized program. Authorities have cancelled the standard model of issuing a new open call, conducting judging panels, and awarding prizes. Mehdizadeh expressed hope that the arts community would accept this "major difference" from past iterations, framed as a product of collective deliberation within the festival's policy council and secretariat.



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## Tourism sector plagued by soaring prices, internet disruptions



### Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's tourism sector is facing significant challenges as prices surge and internet access remains disrupted, said Hormatollah Rafiei, head of the Air Travel and Tourism Services Association. The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts has pledged to restore internet access for select travel agencies within days, he added. Rafiei stated that these outages have completely crippled

agencies' ability to issue tickets, book hotels and tours, and process cancellations. He highlighted the precarious state of the sector, noting that tourism has yet to recover following recent unrest and that many countries now view Iran as an unstable region, severely curtailing tourist exchanges. Rafiei also revealed that airfare prices within Iran jumped by a sudden 60% just one week before the recent protests began. He attributed this increase

to deliberate supply restrictions by authorities, believing it was intended to inflate prices. "When prices were reasonable, there was little enthusiasm for air travel. But now, with these prices, no one can afford to travel." The crisis has led to a dramatic rise in prices on international routes still serviced by Iranian carriers. Rafiei reported that a Tehran-Dubai ticket, previously sold for 40 to 60 million rials, has skyrocketed to over 500 million rials. Tehran-Istanbul fares have reached between 800 and 900 million rials – a tenfold increase he condemns as exploitative given the country's economic climate. Rafiei emphasized, "Given the public's lack of travel motivation and the challenging economic conditions, there should be no exploitation through selling tickets at prices many times higher than before."

## Iran's dam inflows decline amid persistent drought concerns

### Social Desk

Dam inflows across Iran have fallen by 10% year-on-year since the start of the current water year (September 23), prompting calls for stringent water conservation measures, officials confirmed on January 19. Despite near-normal rainfall conditions, reservoirs remain critically low, according to the Ministry of Energy. "The situation is fragile," stated Firouz Qassemzadeh, director-general of the Office of Water Information and Data, adding that "Despite a 5% decrease in rainfall compared to the long-term average, we've seen an 83% increase compared to last year. However, the deficit remains significant." Reservoir storage currently stands at approximately 35%, a 19% drop from the previous year. Qassemzadeh noted that Iran's ranking in rainfall compared to its 58-year historical average is currently 30th, ILNA reported.



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While the Meteorological Organization forecasts further precipitation, Qassemzadeh cautioned that the recent rainfall has not been sufficient to offset the effects of a prolonged drought, particularly over the past six years. "The SPI index demonstrates a serious reduction in river flows, dam inflows, groundwater reserves, and wetlands," he added. Several provinces, including Tehran, Isfahan, Khorasan Razavi, Qom, Zanjan, and Markazi, are experiencing particularly

precarious conditions. "Water supply for potable use in cities reliant on these sources – including Tehran, Karaj, Mashhad, Arak, Qom, Isfahan, Yazd, and Tabriz – is already facing limitations," Qassemzadeh said. "Water management is a critical necessity." Hormozgan, Kerman, and South Khorasan provinces have experienced rainfall increases exceeding 50% above the long-term average, while Tehran has suffered a reduction of over 70%, Qassemzadeh added.

## Relying on people ...

Evidence shows the involvement of external actors, particularly groups affiliated with Israel and the United States, in fueling the unrest. What is your analysis of this matter? These adversarial countries have been working through television channels to stir up riots in Iran's streets, attempting to orchestrate casualties, cause bloodshed, increase resentment and reproduce violence. Information emerged that on Thursday, January 8, these groups, organized and armed, moved into several cities with the intent to create casualties. Law enforcement and the Basij forces were instructed not to carry weapons and were prohibited from firing. The highest number of casualties occurred that Thursday evening. Finally, when the country was on the brink of a full-blown urban war, security, military, law enforcement, and Basij forces prepared to counter

the threat. However, the situation was ultimately contained because the unrest was not homegrown and was directed from abroad. The United States, whose outpost in the region is, in effect, the Israeli regime, launched an attack on Iran in June. They realized that continuing the conflict would leave nothing of Israel remaining. They concluded that a direct air war with Iran would not achieve their goal – to overthrow the government and disintegrate the country. It should be noted that they consider ousting the government a crucial step toward partitioning the nation. US President Donald Trump has clearly concluded that unless a ground war and an urban war are launched in Iran, and the people are brought into confrontation with the government, he will not succeed. Accordingly, in my opinion, Trump will double down on economic pressure.

**What lessons can be learned from this experience to prevent similar incidents in the future?** In an economic war, temporary rise in prices due to foreign obstruction is natural and the government must honestly tell the people. The Iranian people are enlightened; they have a good understanding of history and are politically astute. The government must be very transparent with the people, both about its capabilities and its obstacles. The Iranian people are willing to accept economic hardships for the sake of independence, freedom, and a positive future, provided the government is completely transparent and honest with them. Furthermore, in both the June war and the recent unrest, the people were the ultimate game-changers and the key to victory. Obstacles to the people's presence and participation must be quickly removed. Reliance must

be placed on the people as the source of political power. It is the most important historical duty of all pillars of the state and the people to preserve this Iran, especially in a situation where powerful nations seeking to swallow the world are trying to break it up. The easiest, most cost-effective, most beneficial, and most productive way to preserve Iran is to respect Iranians and all those with Iranian credentials. Respect, ensuring rights, defending security, providing the best welfare, and honesty and transparency with the people are crucial.

**What actions can be taken to promote national unity, reduce divisions and foster empathy in society?** In the past protests, some officials' focus on the issue of the hijab law after the unrest was not well-calculated. However, after the 12-day war in June, when the people forgot

the divisions and became united, the Islamic Republic demonstrated that it had heard the protests, felt the pain and was pursuing a remedy. It has sought to get to the root of the problem. In my opinion, this approach, compared to the response to the hijab issue after those previous unrests, is more mature and honest. The Iranian government must constantly seek feedback on its actions and decisions and pursue a corrective process. Fortunately, most of the people have come to the conclusion that the Israeli regime, which has killed 20,000 children in recent months, and the Americans, who have imposed the most wars in history on the world, want to destroy Iran and do not bring prosperity, freedom, independence, or dignity to the country. Fortunately, after many years of experience, the government has made significant progress in this regard.