

Minister urges expansion of cultural infrastructure as participation rates lag

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Abbas Salehi, on Thursday warned of chronically low cultural consumption nationwide as he inaugurated a major cultural and artistic complex in the western border city of Sarpol-e Zahab, calling cultural infrastructure the "vital breathing space" of cities. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Sarpol-e Zahab Cultural and Artistic Complex in Kermanshah Province, Salehi said official data from his ministry showed an unsatisfactory level of public engagement with cultural activities, despite Iran's deep-rooted civilizational and artistic heritage, IRNA reported.

Citing the 2023 Iranian Lifestyle

Survey, he said a large proportion of citizens do not visit museums, cinemas, theaters or concerts over the course of a year, while book reading levels remain weak.

"66% do not visit museums, galleries or historical sites, 67% do not go to the cinema, 86% do not attend theater performances and 82% do not go to music concerts," he said. Average weekly book reading stands at about 2.5 hours, with newspaper and magazine reading at 43 minutes.

"These figures reveal a paradox in a country whose semantic core is culture and art," Salehi said, adding that the main structural bottleneck was the shortage of accessible cultural facilities such as libraries, cinemas, galleries and performance halls.



Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Abbas Salehi, speaks during the opening of a major cultural and artistic complex in the western border city of Sarpol-e Zahab, in Kermanshah Province, on January 29, 2026.

ISNA

Drawing a parallel with urban green spaces, he said the acceptance since the 1990s of parks as the "physical lungs" of cities should now be extended to cultural venues as the "breathing space of the soul" and a driver of social vitality. "This requires a two-way resolve: Officials must prioritize it and the public must demand it," he said. Salehi described Sarpol-e Zahab, a city of more than 90,000 people near the Iraqi border, as a region with a distinguished legacy in culture, art and the Iran-Iraq war, adding that the new complex and similar projects were a tangible response to long-standing infrastructure gaps, particularly in border and less-developed areas.

He said his personal attendance at the ceremony was intended to ensure the project's final delivery and the removal of remaining administrative hurdles, praising a decade of efforts by provincial



managers, engineers and workers. "This is not merely a construction project; it symbolizes a serious commitment to securing basic cultural infrastructure across the country," he said.

The 2,700-square-meter complex is among the most modern cultural facilities in Iran. It has a 450-seat capacity and is fully equipped with a conference hall, power and

lighting systems that meet national standards, providing a platform for cultural and artistic activities in western Kermanshah. At the ceremony, Kermanshah's director general for culture and Islamic guidance, Mozafar Teymouri, said the project's completion ahead of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution showed the government's determination to

meet cultural demands. He said the complex could become a regional cultural hub and potentially serve pilgrims traveling to Iraq for the Arbaeen commemoration, provided sustained funding for events was secured. Arbaeen marks the end of the 40-day mourning period for Imam Hussein, a central figure in Shia Islam.



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Ammar film festival closes in Tehran, honors Behrouz Afkhami



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Iran's 16th Ammar Popular Film Festival closed on Thursday night in Tehran, awarding leading documentary and fiction works and paying tribute to veteran filmmaker Behrouz Afkhami at a ceremony marked by strong

political and cultural messaging. The closing event was held at Bahman Cinema in the Iranian capital on January 29, attended by filmmakers, jurors and families of those killed in past conflicts, ILNA reported.

Afkhami, a prominent director and former lawmaker, was honored for his career and for his latest feature 'The Morning of The Execution,' which also received a festival citation.

Hossein Shahrabi Farahani, a space scientist and the subject of the documentary 'Hope in Space,' said international cooperation was possible despite US sanctions.

He said his team had signed a satellite-related contract with Russia, calling it "the riskiest government contract in Iran's space history," and added that sanctions had not altered his path. "If someone wants to work,

sanctions are just an excuse," he said, adding that a message broadcast from a satellite during the festival was that "the United States can do nothing".

Shahrabi Farahani later received the People's Independence Award from the family of the late nuclear scientist Fereydoun Abbasi.

Afkhami urged young filmmakers to focus on documentaries and docudramas, warning that cinema would become "increasingly artificial" with the spread of artificial intelligence. "For lasting cinema, one must think about documentary and low-budget filmmaking, which allows more production," he said.

Among the festival's main awards, the top Lantern prize in the cultural war documentary section went to 'Everything, Forever' by Mohammad Hassan Yadevari. 'Not a Dream,' directed by

Amir Mazloumi and Mohammad Mehdi Ayoubi, won the Lantern in the Iranian Dream documentary category. In the historical and social documentary section, the Lantern was awarded to 'standing by the Thames' by Seyed Mostafa Mousavi-Tabar.

In fiction, 'Chocolate VI' by Mehdi Mirqiasi won the Lantern for best feature film, while 'Tears of the Reedbed' by Mehdi Jafari received an honorable mention. Afkhami's 'The Morning of The Execution' was singled out for special recognition.

Founded in 2010, the Ammar Popular Film Festival focuses on documentaries and narrative films centered on revolutionary, social and resistance themes. The 16th edition was held under the slogan "The civilizational battle of Islamic Iran against the barbaric West".

EU's strategic ...

Amir-Abdollahian listened carefully and responded in more measured terms that, if this were to happen, military attachés of European countries would also have to leave Tehran. Following that exchange, European positions receded from view for some time. The issue has now resurfaced, notably at a meeting where Iran was the first agenda item and Syria, with its particular history, the second.

European officials did not even take the trouble to study regional developments over the past three years to understand where the actual centers of terrorism have been and who has acted against it. In her interview, Kallas

stated openly that the purpose of listing the IRGC was to exert pressure on the Iranian government, thereby publicly acknowledging the political nature of the foreign ministers' decision. She presented no evidence of terrorist activity by the Guards, instead describing the move as a political tool to pressure Tehran and support civil society, while leaving its implementation to the criminal laws of member states.

The EU today finds itself in its weakest political, security and military position. It has lost its moral capital through support for the war crimes of Benjamin Netanyahu, and its economic capital through backing the inconclusive war in Ukraine. Militarily, Europe

has never carried real weight without the United States, and its claims of military capability are now openly mocked by Donald Trump himself.

The political nature of Europe's decision to list the Guards means that, just as the force is being placed on the list by a political decision, it could also be removed by another political decision in the future. However, Europe should recognize that designating the official defense force of a sovereign state sets a dangerous precedent in international law and international relations.

While it must be said with regret that recent US actions under Trump have severely undermined the credibility of international law, Europe, which

claims to uphold international rights and values, is engaging in a process whose consequences it does not fully grasp.

In seeking to bridge the transatlantic gap, Europe is widening its divide with Asia and Africa, failing to recognize that it is a neighbor to Asia and Africa through Islamic countries. Preoccupied with the Ukraine crisis to its east, Europe is losing sight of developments to its south.

The IRGC is Iran's official defense force and, over two centuries of Iranian history, represents the only force to have emerged from deep within Iranian society itself. It is fully self-sufficient and has no dependence on other countries

for its military needs. As such, the EU's declaration will have no impact on the Guards' operational or combat capabilities, except that it is likely to expose the Union to numerous legal challenges in the near future.

Europe has taken this risk based on a flawed calculation that the current face-off between Iran and the United States will quickly end in Washington's favor, allowing Europe to cash in on its political alignment by seeking a reward from the United States. What Europe fails to see is that it has made a strategic error, and that regardless of how the current Iran-US confrontation ends, Europe will emerge as the strategic loser.