

Minister: Comprehensive free zone tourism plan signed, targeting €6b health revenue



Reza Salehi-Amiri
IRNA

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri announced on Wednesday the finalization of a comprehensive plan in the form of a memorandum of understanding for the development of tourism capacities across the country's free zones.

"My colleagues met with the heads of free zones this week for joint cooperation. Yesterday, in a meeting with [Reza] Masrour, the head of free zones, we agreed to develop tourism infrastructure, create attractions, and provide necessary incentives to guide people to islands and free zones. We also signed a comprehensive program in the form

of a memorandum of understanding for the development of tourism capacities in free zones," Salehi-Amiri said.

"Free zones are one of the hubs that, if we pay attention to them, some people who travel to neighboring countries will be inclined to change their travel to free zones like Kish. The more we invest in free zones, the more tourism revenues within the country will be strengthened."

The minister also underlined the Islamic Republic's plan to draw two million health tourists in the next two years.

"Based on the Seventh Development Plan, our commitment until 2028 is to attract two million health tourists and generate 6 billion euros in revenue, and this plan will definitely be operational-

ized," Salehi-Amiri said. "Currently, Kish Island has 50 active hotels and 50 hotels under construction, and this city is one of our tourism hubs. Other free zones like Qeshm also possess such capacities," he added. Salehi-Amiri enumerated the merits of health tourism in Iran, saying, "First, we are one of the few countries in the region that has a very high specialized capacity of doctors and specialists. The second point is that there are more than 800 hospitals, treatment centers, and advanced equipment in the country, and the third point is affordability. The average costs in Iran are one-fifth of the region and one-tenth of Europe, and patients receive the same services for one-fifth of the cost in Iran."

Tehran, Riyadh underscore continued cooperation in Hajj pilgrimage

Arts & Culture Desk

Alireza Rashidian, the head of Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, met on Tuesday with the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Tehran, discussing the progress of joint cooperation between the two countries in the field of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage, and emphasizing the expansion of ties to provide appropriate services to pilgrims.

In a meeting with Abdullah bin Saud al-Anzi, Rashidian — as reported by IRNA — appreciated the cooperation of the Saudi side in providing services to Iranian pilgrims and underscored their continuation in the upcoming Hajj in the next Iranian calendar year.

Pointing to the 1405 Hajj agreement, he stated, "The precise implementation of executive and cultural programs within the framework of the understandings reached can pave the way for improving the quality of services and increasing pilgrim satisfaction."

Rashidian also underscored the necessity of accelerating executive processes, timely coordination, and continuous technical interactions between the two



Alireza Rashidian (r), the head of Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, meets with Saudi Arabian Ambassador to Tehran, Abdullah bin Saud al-Anzi, on February 17, 2026.
IRNA

countries, adding, "Cohesive and planned cooperation plays an important role in facilitating pilgrimage affairs during the Hajj season."

The Saudi ambassador, for his part, praised Iranian pilgrims as among the most disciplined and law-abiding pilgrims, considering them a role model in adhering to rules and regulations.

Both sides expressed hope that with the continuation of such talks, joint cooperation in the field of Hajj and pilgrimage will be further strengthened.

The development comes as some Muslim and Arab countries declared Wednesday as

the first day of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. The countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Yemen, Palestine and Lebanon declared Wednesday as the first day of Ramadan, while other countries such as Iran, Oman, Jordan, Syria and Egypt announced that Thursday is the start of the holy fasting month.

Iran among top 10 countries with highest obesity rate: Deputy minister

Social Desk

The deputy health minister raised the alarm on Wednesday that Iran is among the top 10 countries with the highest prevalence of obesity across the world, stressing, "In our country, one out of every three students suffers from obesity and overweight, which is a serious warning for the future health of the country."

Alireza Raeisi was reported by IRNA as saying that the issue of obesity should not be reduced merely to weight loss and fitness, adding that obesity or overweight signal changes in the body, ultimately leading to an imbalance in the consumption of macronutrients and micronutrients.

"The consumption of unhealthy foods in Iran is very high and increasing. Statistics show that the rate of obesity in the country has had a sharp upward trend from 2022 to 2024."

The deputy minister took to the task some incorrect beliefs and traditions, such as "chubby children are more lovable," saying, "This wrong attitude of parents leads to childhood obesity, and later,



as the individual ages, no one can be held accountable for its complications and consequences."

Stressing that obesity and overweight in the adolescent age group is very concerning in the country, Raeisi said,

"One of the main reasons for this trend is the sharp decrease in physical activity, especially among children and adolescents, because most of these individuals spend many hours of the day in virtual spaces without the slightest physical movement, which in recent years has replaced playing computer games.

This, along with the lack of necessary physical activity, has had and continues to have irreversible consequences for individuals (now and in middle age)."

Pointing to weight loss as one of the complications of many diseases such as uncontrolled diabetes, hyperthyroidism, and even cancer, he stressed that in such cases, the amount of weight loss itself is not important, but rather the speed of the individual's weight changes is important, and if this weight change (decrease or increase) happens in a short period, it can be dangerous.

Joint drill with ...

The experience of US engagement with other international actors has shown that Washington only backs down when confronted with "hard power" and "balanced coalitions."

Therefore, Russia's presence alongside Iran can be interpreted not only as defense convergence but also as a sign of Iran's transnational "deterrence" and its transformation into a deterrence network against NATO and US expansionism. The exercise signals to the American side that the cost of any miscalculation in the region would mean confrontation with a united front of Eastern powers, not Iran alone. The clear message is that Iran has shifted from being an easy military target to becoming a hub of regional defense convergence against the West's destabilizing adventurism.

Should Moscow's participation in this

exercise be assessed within the framework of routine cooperation, or does it carry broader strategic dimensions under current conditions, particularly in light of regional geopolitical developments and the war in Ukraine?

Viewing this exercise as a routine event would amount to ignoring the realities of the international arena. Today, the international community is witnessing the formation of a global "resistance front" against US hegemony, with the Ukraine war and tensions in West Asia representing two fronts of the same confrontation. Cooperation between Tehran and Moscow at this juncture is entirely strategic, as both countries are under the most severe unlawful pressure from Washington. Russia has come to understand that its security vis-à-vis NATO is intertwined with Iran's security in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. Accordingly,

the drill carries a message beyond military cooperation and stands as a symbol of the political will of the two powers to reshape the unipolar order and challenge US maritime dominance in international waters.

Given other recent drills by the IRGC in the Strait of Hormuz, what impact will these moves have on US security calculations and those of regional actors?

US decision-makers are highly pragmatic and clearly understand the language of "cost-benefit." When asymmetric drills by the IRGC in the Strait of Hormuz—which target the vulnerabilities of America's classical fleet—are combined with oceanic maneuvers by Iran and Russia, commanders at United States Central Command realize that their aircraft carriers in the region are not instruments of power but rather "large and vulnerable targets." This situation makes

the "security dilemma" unsolvable for the United States. For regional countries, the message is equally clear: Washington is unable to safeguard even its own hegemony, let alone guarantee the security of its partners. As a result, this display of battlefield leverage will push US regional allies to rethink their calculations and steer clear of destabilizing policies. Ultimately, the outcome of Iran-Russia military convergence offers a tangible model of regional collective security that could, in the future, draw in new members from among regional states.

This exercise comes shortly after the second round of Iran-US talks in Geneva. Does this timing point to a form of synergy between diplomacy and hard power in Iran's approach?

This is certainly the case. Historical ex-

perience and behavioral studies of the United States show that Washington grants no concessions at the negotiating table unless compelled to do so on the "ground." Holding this exercise alongside the Geneva talks constitutes precisely the leverage Iran's diplomats require. The move reminds the US team that its "options on the table," particularly military threats, have lost their edge, and that Iran is negotiating from a position of strength, relying on indigenous capabilities. In fact, the exercise provides a concrete backing for diplomacy, ensuring that the other side understands that if the diplomatic path is blocked, it will face a powerful Iran at sea and on land that does not fear confrontation. It appears that Iran's preemptive initiatives in the maritime domain will, in the future, catch the United States off guard with many surprises.