Iran launches emergency restoration of war-damaged historical sites

Iranica Desk

The director general of the Office for the Registration of Historical Sites at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts has outlined details of urgent restoration efforts for historical monuments damaged in the war.

Alireza Izadi told ISNA about the emergency restoration of historical sites damaged during the war imposed by the United States and Israel against Iran. "In general, restoration is carried out in accordance with the responsibilities of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage. In the first step, a restoration plan is prepared, then the matter of securing funding is placed on the agenda, and after that restoration operations begin."

He added, "Last week, Cultural Heritage Minister Seyed Reza Salehi-Amiri also held a meeting and instructed restoration teams, whether working through contracts or directly administered arrangements, to begin their activities. Part of the restoration work has already been started by our own colleagues under directly administered arrangements, which are naturally easier to carry out. Another part will be implemented through contracts, which requires funding. In this regard, our colleagues are making preparations, and the technical councils are also reviewing the plans."

He continued, "Part of the work is being carried out directly and includes minor works and fine details, which are currently underway. After the Technical Council approves the major restoration plans, contracts will be signed and those sections will also enter the implementation phase. Fortunately, we are now in a suitable season for carrying out field operations. We also hope that, with the positive commitment given by Hamid Pourmohammadi from the Planning and Budget Organization

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during a meeting held about two weeks ago in the presence of the minister, we will achieve favorable results regarding funding as well, and after final approval by the Technical Council, move the restoration operations forward as quickly as possible. At that same meeting, a detailed report on the extent of the damage was prepared, summarized, and submitted so that it could be placed on the agenda for funding allocations."

Regarding whether the sites would directly enter the restoration phase or whether protective measures would first be considered for them, he explained, "Given the current conditions, which are neither a state of full war nor stable peace, emergency protection has been considered for all complexes and is being implemented. Sites that showed greater sensitivity during monitoring, as well as those that have suffered damage, have been placed under initial protective measures so that the necessary preparedness exists should conditions worsen. These measures have included protective coverings, relocation of some objects—especially in museums—as well as activities involving historic buildings and heritage urban areas."

Izadi added, "However, restoration itself is a separate phase and applies to sites that, unfortunately, have been damaged. Part of these measures has begun, while another part requires more detailed studies, especially in cases such as examining the underlying layers and mirrorwork of Golestan Palace or S'adabad Palace, which will naturally be time-consuming. It is necessary first to complete the technical studies and prepare the plans, and then, after funding is secured, these projects will be handed over to contractors and implemented."

He also responded to a question about whether, given that UNESCO has been asked to send international experts to prepare a report, the start of urgent restoration would interfere with that process. He explained, "We hope these experts will come, but we cannot delay the implementation of our own measures while waiting for their arrival. At the same time, documentation is being carried out fully. It is clear what kind of damage each section has sustained, and all photographs and records have been registered. Therefore, even if restoration is carried out, it will be entirely in accordance with professional principles, and for experts it will be possible to distinguish restored sections from the original parts. This distinction is fully identifiable."

Izadi also spoke about securing financial resources for carrying out the restoration work, saying, "Every year, in addition to internal credits, we also make use of the resources of the Management and Planning Organization. Negotiations have also been held with international organizations, and the Association of Benefactors is active as well. We hope these groups will also cooperate in this process and help provide resources."

Ancient qanats face modern water crisis in Khorasan Razavi

Iranica Desk

For centuries, the land of Iran — particularly Khorasan Razavi Province — demonstrated remarkable wisdom in linking water and soil. In an age when the scorching sun beat down on the plains and rainfall was scarce and irregular, the ancestors of this region found a solution through the qanat system.

A qanat was not merely a water channel or a tunnel dug into the earth. It symbolized a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, sustaining the lifelines of this land for thousands of years. Today, however, these historic systems appear to be losing their battle for survival, under pressure from costly technologies and unsustainable policies.

Across Iran, from Khorasan to Yazd and Kerman, the story of qanats has become one of decline and neglect. This valuable heritage, which used gravity rather than electricity or fuel to carry fresh and continuous water from mountains to thirsty farms, is now being overwhelmed by deep wells that use powerful pumps to drain underground water reserves at unsustainable rates.

Experts warn that the country has mistakenly replaced intelligent water-harvesting methods with excessive extraction of fossil groundwater resources. The qanat was not only a source of water, but also a mechanism that maintained groundwater balance and formed the backbone of national food security.

Qasabeh Qanat, Gonabad
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Baladeh Qanat, Ferdows
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Iran is home to around 41,000 qanat lines and this reflects how the livelihoods of Iranians have historically depended on agriculture and livestock farming. Yet decades of recurring drought have severely damaged regional water resources. Springs have dried up entirely, and the limited water that remains is often insufficient even for wildlife and birds, let alone for irrigating farms and orchards.

Ali-Akbar Kharazmi, a qanat researcher, criticized the short-term economic approach to water management in an interview with ISNA.

"Unfortunately, in recent years, whenever even the smallest water shortage has emerged, users have turned to uncontrolled drilling of deep wells instead of restoring and managing qanats," he said.

He added that this unscientific approach, combined with countless permits for wells and declining rainfall, has sharply reduced the output of qanats that sustained villages for centuries, leaving many completely abandoned.

He noted that qanats in Iran date back more than 2,000 years. "Our ancestors used the simplest tools to bring water from deep underground to the surface and make ecological sustainability possible," he said.

"Yet today, weak technical studies and dependence on mechanical pumping have pushed this indigenous knowledge to the margins, even though qanats such as Qasabeh Qanat Gonabad and Baladeh Qanat of Ferdows have received global recognition."

Kharazmi stressed that these vital lifelines, which represent agricultural identity and resilience in harsh climates, should not be sacrificed to short-term thinking.

"The revival of qanats and the management of water resources based on accurate data is the only path back to the sustainable model our ancestors understood so well and which we are now rapidly losing," he said.

He also warned that increased water extraction and industrial expansion along qanat routes have accelerated their gradual drying.

"The presence of factories and deep agricultural wells in these regions has caused a noticeable drop in qanat water levels, resulting in significant declines in farming activity," he said.

Referring to Iran's qanat protection law, passed in 1927, he said proper enforcement remains weak. Farmers and qanat users, he argued, should be supported within the legal framework.

Kharazmi further warned that drying agricultural land could threaten regional employment and economic security. Owners and users of qanats need government support to keep these systems active and functioning — support that reduces maintenance costs while preventing deterioration and collapse.

He emphasized that protecting qanats is a shared social responsibility and can only be achieved by safeguarding their boundaries and preventing further permits for agricultural wells.

The highest concentration of qanats is found in central, eastern, and southeastern Iran. Among the most important examples is the Qasabeh Qanat of Gonabad, regarded as one of the country's finest achievements in qanat engineering.

He said qanats in Khorasan Razavi Province have deep historical roots and once supplied drinking water and irrigation needs for many local communities.

Many villages and even some cities across Iran were established alongside the development of qanats, he noted. Cities such as Gonabad, Qazvin, Yazd, Kerman, and Neyshabur grew through the creation and expansion of these water systems.

At a time when water shortages threaten the future of agriculture and settlement in Iran's desert regions, he said restoring qanats is not only a matter of preserving heritage, but also a necessity for food security and the survival of local communities.

He highlighted the unique advantages of qanats in balancing underground aquifers. Unlike deep wells, qanats require no fossil fuels or electricity and rely solely on gravity to provide sustainable and low-cost water for drinking and farming.

Ancient landmarks such as the Qasabeh Qanat of Gonabad, he said, stand as proof of the wisdom of earlier generations in water management — wisdom that enabled large desert cities such as Yazd, Kerman, and Neyshabur to flourish.

Kharazmi also rejected short-term arguments against qanats, noting that the number of people benefiting from qanat systems is far greater than those dependent on other methods of water extraction. The livelihoods of large numbers of farmers depend on these clear underground flows. Stabilizing qanat output, therefore, directly contributes to stabilizing employment and reducing rural migration.

He attributed the collapse of many qanats to a combination of natural and human factors, including falling groundwater levels caused by negative water balances, drought linked to climate change, and excessive development of deep wells supported by energy subsidies.

In addition, the breakdown of traditional management systems and soaring repair costs have pushed many qanats toward abandonment.

Kharazmi criticized the current funding model, saying that when restoration budgets are minimal and released in small amounts, the economic incentive for users to rehabilitate qanats disappears, leading to further destruction of ancient heritage.

To reverse the crisis, he called for legal reforms, public participation, watershed management, and tighter control over expansion.

He said revising well-permit regulations, strictly enforcing the quantitative and qualitative protection zones of qanats, involving local people and farmers more directly in restoration and maintenance, implementing upstream seasonal flood-control projects to recharge aquifers, and preventing unsustainable exploitation of rivers and tributaries that feed qanats are all essential steps toward recovery.