

**INSIGHT**

# War leaves its mark on Iran's cultural heritage



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The Chehel Sotun (40 Columns), a 17th century pavilion and garden in Iran's historic city of Isfahan, was damaged in US-Israeli strikes, March 9, 2026



**A**irstrikes in Iran have damaged several historic landmarks, including UNESCO-listed sites, raising concern among cultural experts and officials about the protection of heritage during the conflict.

UNESCO's World Heritage Centre has confirmed damage to several sites on its global heritage list, though the full extent remains unclear, its director Lazare Eloundou Assomo said.

Several of the affected buildings carried the Blue Shield emblem, an international symbol used to identify protected cultural heritage sites under international law and often described as the "Red Cross for cultural heritage."

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi later criticized UNESCO's response. "It's natural that a regime that won't last a century hates nations with ancient pasts. But where's UNESCO? Its silence is unacceptable," he wrote on X.

Among the sites affected is the historic Golestan Palace, a Qajar-era complex in central Tehran added to the UNESCO list in 2013.

According to Afarin Emami, director of the Golestan Palace World Heritage complex, blast waves from airstrikes on March 1 shattered windows and damaged delicate mirrorwork in several halls.





Debris spread around in a hall at Tehran's historic Golestan Palace, after a US-Israeli strike, March 1, 2026

Images published by Iranian media show damaged crystal chandeliers and wooden doors and windows torn from their frames.

Emami said museum objects inside the palace were not harmed because they had been moved to secure storage after earlier tensions raised concerns about possible escalation.

The nearby Grand Bazaar of Tehran, a vast network of corridors forming a key part of the capital's historic fabric, also sustained damage. Other buildings affected in Tehran include the former Senate Palace and the historic former Police Headquarters.

Several days later, further blast waves reportedly caused damage in Isfahan, one of Iran's most important historic cities.

Images circulating online show shattered windows, cracked walls and fallen mirrorwork at multiple sites, including the Safavid-era Chehel Sotoun Palace and the Ali Qapu Palace in the Naqsh-e Jahan area.

The primary target appeared to be the provincial governor's office building in the nearby Rashk-e Jahan complex, which was reportedly directly bombed. Ashraf Hall, a Safavid struc



known for its gold-decorated ceilings, sustained significant damage, with photographs showing fallen tiles scattered among office furniture.



Governor's office (Rashk-e Janan Palace) in Isfahan after bombing

Elsewhere, Iranian media reported damage in Sanandaj, where several historic mansions lost sections of plaster decoration, mirrorwork and wooden doors. In northern Iran, reports suggest the Safavid-era Safi Abad Palace in Behshahr may have been affected by nearby strikes targeting a military radar facility, though no confirmed photographs have been released.

Near the historic Falak-ol-Aflak Castle in western Iran, the provincial cultural heritage office located within the castle's protected zone was destroyed and five staff members and heritage protection personnel were reportedly injured. The fortress itself was not damaged.

The incidents have triggered heated debate among Iranian social media users, with some criticizing the government's own handling of cultural heritage protection.

One user wrote on X: "At least write that the Islamic Republic should not build military bases next to heritage sites when you write that a historic monument was damaged by Israeli or US attacks."

Others argued the destruction must be viewed in the broader context of the conflict. "We can rebuild buildings," one commenter wrote. "Save your tears for the 40,000 people who were killed."

Some groups, including the Jurists' Council for a Democratic Iran, have called on all sides to respect international conventions protecting cultural heritage during armed conflict.



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### Allies rally, rivals brace after Mojtaba Khamenei's rise

Mar 12, 2026, 18:23 GMT • Behrouz Turani

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Regional reactions to the appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei as Iran's new Supreme Leader have revealed growing anxiety about stability, with Tehran's allies condemning the killing of his father and adversaries hardening their military posture.

Khamenei Jr's continued absence from public view has fueled speculation among analysts and diplomats about how power is being exercised during the transition.

The message read on his behalf on state television on Thursday was viewed by some observers as closely aligned with the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) messaging, prompting questions about the balance between formal leadership and the IRGC.



As expected, Tehran's regional non-state allies in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon have rallied around the new leader, calling him the "Leader of the blessed Islamic Revolution." His ascendance to power is perceived by these armed groups as continuity in funding and weapons transfers.

Not many share this view in the region and beyond.

### **Arab neighbors**

Across the Persian Gulf, Mojtaba's appointment has been met with a mix of defensive military posturing, criticism, and calls for closer security coordination.

Tensions with Saudi Arabia rose sharply after his appointment when an Iranian strike hit a Saudi residential area. Prior reporting in US media, including The Washington Post, indicated Riyadh had privately urged Washington to use significant military force to prevent Iran from emerging stronger after the transition.

Elsewhere in the region, Tehran and its proxies have been blamed for strikes on civilian infrastructure—including a desalination plant in Bahrain.

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit denounced Iran's "reckless policy," reflecting broader anxieties among smaller Gulf states.

Reactions from Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have reflected concern about escalation, as the leadership transition coincided with direct attacks on regional infrastructure.

### **Turkey**

In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan struck a supportive tone, calling Iranian officials "brothers" and expressing hope they would "get through this trap-filled period."

Ankara has also criticized US strikes and appears likely to maintain pragmatic engagement with Iran's leadership to avoid instability along its borders.

### **Russia, China and the EU**

Russia's President Vladimir Putin was among the first to respond, calling Ali Khamenei's death a "cynical murder" and describing him as an "outstanding statesman." His message to President Massoud Pezeshkian emphasized solidarity with Iran during the transition.



China adopted a more cautious tone, stressing respect for Iran's sovereignty and opposing regime change. Chinese officials framed the succession as a constitutional matter and an internal Iranian process.

The European Union's reaction has been more fragmented. Diplomats say some member states quietly hope the transition could open space for political change, while others fear instability could widen the conflict. Publicly, EU officials have emphasized de-escalation regardless of who leads Iran.

None of the three powers aligned with Tehran as the United Nations condemned IRGC-linked attacks on regional targets this week.

## Israel

Israel was the only country in the region to explicitly question the legitimacy of Mojtaba's appointment, describing it as a continuation of what it called the IRGC's "terror regime."

Even before the appointment, Defense Minister Israel Katz wrote on X that "any leader appointed to continue the plan to destroy Israel will be an unequivocal target for elimination."

Public reactions across Iran and parts of the Arab world have been mixed. Some early expressions of relief at Ali Khamenei's death gave way to concern about escalation as Mojtaba's ties to the IRGC came into focus.

Across the region, officials and analysts say the leadership transition has reinforced fears that an already volatile conflict could widen further in the weeks ahead.

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## Checkpoint attacks open new front in Iran war

Mar 12, 2026, 13:16 GMT • **Arash Sohrabi**

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The Iran war appears to be entering a new phase as attacks increasingly target checkpoints and street-level security units, while witness reports sent to Iran International suggest many of those positions are being moved or dismantled after their locations are exposed.



For days the conflict had focused largely on military bases, missile sites and command facilities, particularly in southern Iran, as part of the wider US-Israeli campaign that has struck thousands of targets across the country since the war began on February 28.

But since Wednesday evening, reported drone strikes on checkpoints in Tehran have pointed to a parallel line of pressure: the local security posts, patrol units and temporary deployments used to enforce control on the streets.

Iranian state-linked media said several checkpoints in Tehran were hit, killing members of the security forces and Basij militia. The reported locations included positions in multiple districts across the capital.

The development suggests the conflict is increasingly intersecting with the structures the state relies on to control neighborhoods rather than only its larger military infrastructure.



Tehran checkpoints hit in reported drone attacks



Desertions, shortages and army-IRGC rift strain Iran's military

### **From fixed bases to moving checkpoints**

Since the start of the war, residents across Iran say checkpoints and patrols have multiplied in major cities as authorities attempt to prevent unrest and maintain control.

At the same time, Iran International has received a steady stream of messages from viewers describing the locations of checkpoints, security deployments and temporary bases.

Some reports describe armed units inspecting vehicles at major highway entrances or intersections. Others mention security forces using schools, sports halls and religious institutions as temporary accommodation or staging points.



Messages received in recent days pointed to deployments in locations ranging from major Tehran highways to entrances to cities such as Karaj, Shiraz, Mashhad and Qazvin. Residents also described units stationed beneath highway bridges, near parks or inside parking areas where buses and motorcycles were parked overnight.

In several cases, viewers reported that checkpoints they had previously seen disappeared within hours or days, while others appeared to move to nearby streets or disperse into smaller patrol groups.

Some messages described security forces sleeping inside buses or personal vehicles and conducting mobile patrols rather than remaining in fixed positions.

Others said checkpoints that had been inspecting vehicles were suddenly dismantled, leaving only a few officers nearby.

Such reports cannot be independently verified in each case. But taken together they suggest that many deployments are becoming more fluid, with positions shifting frequently rather than remaining in one place.



The Imam Reza security unit after sustaining damage, part of the IRGC's Mohammad Rasulullah Corps in Greater Tehran.



## A war over control of the neighborhood

The shift reflects a deeper pressure on the state's local enforcement network.

For years the Islamic Republic has relied on a dense web of Basij, police and Revolutionary Guards positions to control neighborhoods and quickly suppress unrest.

During the recent nationwide protests earlier this year, these same networks formed the backbone of the crackdown that sealed off districts and quashed the demonstrations.

In wartime, those local security units appear to be playing an even more central role.

As larger bases and installations come under pressure from airstrikes, authorities appear to be relying more heavily on mobile checkpoints and temporary deployments to maintain control on the ground.

Now those fallback positions are also being drawn into the conflict.

The result is a battlefield that increasingly overlaps with everyday urban space. Instead of remaining confined to distant military facilities, the war is beginning to touch the street corners, highway entrances and neighborhood patrol routes where the state exerts day-to-day authority.

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## Iran keeps oil flowing to China as Hormuz pressure forces reserve release

Mar 12, 2026, 11:38 GMT

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Iran is still loading about 1.5 million barrels of crude a day in March while China is receiving about 1.25 million barrels daily, Kpler data show, even as days of Iranian pressure around the Strait of Hormuz and rising prices force consuming nations to tap emergency reserves.

The figures suggest Tehran's oil lifeline has not been cut despite a widening maritime crisis that has already disrupted shipping and shaken energy markets since the war began on February 28.



Instead, the conflict is evolving into a prolonged contest over energy flows: Iran continues exporting oil – largely to China – while simultaneously applying military pressure on one of the world's most important oil chokepoints.


The Strait of Hormuz, the narrow passage off Iran's southern coast connecting the Persian Gulf to global markets, normally carries about a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas shipments.

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## Iran keeps oil flowing to China as Hormuz pressure forces reserve release

Mar 12, 2026, 11:22 GMT • Arash Sohrabi

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The Strait of Hormuz, the narrow passage off Iran's southern coast connecting the Persian Gulf to global markets, normally carries about a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas shipments.

But the waterway has effectively become a war zone.

Since the start of hostilities, at least 16 commercial vessels have been struck or attacked in and around the strait and the wider Persian Gulf, according to a Reuters tally.



The incidents have included attacks on tankers, bulk carriers and container ships, forcing evacuations, halting port operations in parts of Iraq and driving insurers and ship operators to reconsider voyages through the area.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have warned that ships passing through the strait could be targeted, reinforcing fears that the waterway is now being used as a pressure point in the wider conflict.



A foreign tanker carrying Iraqi fuel oil damaged after catching fire in Iraq's territorial waters, following unidentified attacks that targeted two foreign tankers, according to Iraqi port officials, near Basra, Iraq, March 12, 2026.

### **Release of strategic reserves**

The growing disruption has pushed the International Energy Agency and major consuming nations to take the extraordinary step of releasing 400 million barrels from strategic reserves, the largest such intervention in the agency's history.

IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said the decision had already had a "strong impact" on markets and was aimed at stabilizing supply after the war triggered one of the biggest oil disruptions on record.



The agency estimates global supply could fall by 8 million barrels per day in March as production across the Middle East is curtailed and shipping through Hormuz slows to a fraction of normal levels.

But the reserve release has done little to calm markets.

Oil prices briefly surged above \$100 a barrel this week and remain volatile as traders weigh the risk that shipping through the Persian Gulf could remain constrained for weeks or months.

Analysts say the problem is not simply the availability of oil but the difficulty of moving it safely through a militarized sea lane.

Joel Hancock, an energy analyst at Natixis CIB, said markets were questioning how quickly emergency reserves could reach buyers, warning that a market balanced through stock releases would be “far less logistically efficient.”

### **Shockwaves beyond oil**

The war has also begun to ripple through global energy markets beyond crude.

In Europe, gas prices rose sharply as fears grew that tanker attacks in the Persian Gulf could disrupt shipments of liquefied natural gas, around 20% of which normally transits the Strait of Hormuz.

Qatar, one of the world's largest LNG exporters, has declared force majeure on some shipments, tightening global supplies and raising concerns about Europe's ability to refill depleted gas storage before next winter.

Financial markets have reacted nervously as well. Rising oil prices have revived fears of inflation and pushed investors to scale back expectations of interest rate cuts by major central banks.

The war's central energy paradox is that Iran cannot fully shut global oil flows without hurting itself, yet it has shown it can make the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz dangerous enough to rattle markets and force governments to act, even while keeping a substantial share of its own exports – mainly to China – moving.



## Tehran steps up threats against critics at home and abroad

Mar 12, 2026, 00:31 GMT • Maryam Sinaiee

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Threatening rhetoric on Iranian state television has intensified fears of renewed repression, as presenters and officials warn critics at home and abroad they could face confiscation of property, prison or even death.

On Tuesday, Reza Molaei, a presenter on Iran's state-run Channel 3, delivered a sharply worded message directed at government opponents living abroad. "When the dust of sedition settles, we will grab you by the collar," he said during the broadcast.

Footage widely shared online showed him going further, referring to an earlier warning from Iran's prosecutor general and suggesting critics could face deadly consequences so that "their mothers would sit in mourning."

The broadcast followed a statement Monday by Iran's Office of the Prosecutor General warning Iranian citizens abroad they could face severe penalties—including confiscation of assets and even the death penalty—if they engage in what authorities describe as "cooperation with the enemy."

Although framed in terms of espionage or intelligence activity, the warning has raised alarm among members of the Iranian diaspora who regularly organize anti-government protests in major cities worldwide.

Participants in those rallies say authorities could identify them through social media posts or videos from demonstrations and target them or their families inside Iran.

Inside the country, officials have issued similarly stark warnings.

Ahmadreza Radan, Iran's police chief, said in a televised interview on March 9 that individuals who take to the streets "at the enemy's behest" would be treated not as protesters but as hostile actors.

"If someone comes to the streets at the enemy's behest, we do not see them as a protester—we see them as an enemy, and we will deal with them accordingly," he said. "All our forces have



their fingers on the trigger and are ready.”

The phrase appeared to reference calls by US and Israeli leaders urging Iranians to challenge the government.

The climate of intimidation has also extended to Iranian athletes abroad.

Several members of Iran’s women’s national football team sought asylum in Australia after declining to sing the national anthem before a match against South Korea, two days after the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—a gesture many observers interpreted as protest against the crackdown.

During a television program, presenter Mohammad Reza Shahbazi denounced the players as “traitors in a time of war,” accusing them of disrespecting the country and calling for harsh punishment.

Legal advocacy group Dadban—run by volunteer lawyers in the Iranian diaspora—warned the rhetoric appearing on state media could legitimize violence against civilians.

“When such threats are aired by official media, it sends the message that deadly force against protesters may be considered legitimate,” the group said. “This seriously increases the risk of escalating violence against citizens.”

The threats come two months after the deadly suppression of nationwide protests in January, which left many in Iranian society still shaken and wary of renewed confrontation.

Some activists say the warnings will not deter them from opposing the government, while others have used the moment to highlight what they describe as decades of pressure on Iranian citizens both inside and outside the country.

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