

Iranian Qari Advances to Semifinal of Saudi Contest



TEHRAN – Iranian qari Yunis Shahmoradi is one of the eight contestants who have managed to advance to the semifinal of the Otr El-kalam Qur'an competition in Saudi Arabia.

Abdullah al-Dughri from Morocco and Hamid al-Raisi from the UAE were the last two competitors to qualify for the semifinals of the World Competition for Qur'an (recitation) and Azan (announcing the call for prayers), an initiative of the General Entertainment Authority (GEA).

Sixteen participants from 13 countries have now qualified for the competition's semifinals, aired on the GEA-sponsored Otr El-kalam TV show of Ramadan on the MBC TV channel.

Semifinals qualifiers are from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Germany, and Spain, Saudi Press Agency reported.

The semifinals in Qur'an kicked off on Saturday with the participation of Muhammad Nour from Ethiopia, Salah Edin Metebid from Germany, Ahmad Alsayyed Ismail from Egypt, Abdulaziz al-Faqih from Saudi Arabia, Abdullah al-Dughri and Zakariya al-Zirk from

Morocco, Yunis Shahmoradi from Iran, and Muhammad al-Habti from Spain.

The Azan category in Otr El-kalam contest will see the participation of Muhammad Hafez al-Rahman and Ibrahim Assad from the UK, Issa al-Jaadi from Yemen, Muhammad al-Sharif from Saudi Arabia, Hamid al-Raisi from the UAE, Rahif al-Haj from Lebanon, Dialdin from Indonesia, and Riyan Hosawi, from Nigeria.

Launched on the first day of Ramadan, the show is the largest of its kind in the world; it is an initiative of Saudi Arabia's General Entertainment Authority.

This year, the contest attracted 50,000 Muslim entrants from more than 100 countries, all vying for qualification. Of the 2,116 contestants who made the cut, 36 participants (18 from Quran recitation and 18 specializing in the call to prayer) qualified for the final stages.

Participants demonstrate their vocal capabilities by reciting verses of the Quran before a jury composed of experts in recitation, phonetics and maqamat (music structures).

The total prize money for the competition exceeds 12 million Saudi riyals (\$3.2 million).

Iftar: Celebration of Spirit of Spirituality and Gratitude

TEHRAN – As the sun sets over cities and towns, millions of Muslims across the country eagerly anticipate the call to prayer, signaling the end of their day-long fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

Iftar, the meal that breaks the fast, is not just a time to refuel, but an opportunity for families and friends to come together and celebrate the spirit of togetherness, spirituality and gratitude, lifestyle magazine Living in Tehran wrote on its website.

The importance of Ramadan goes beyond fasting; it is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer, and strengthening the bonds within the Muslim community. As a result, iftar gatherings more than just a meal; they are a social event that encourages empathy and solidarity. The sharing of food during iftar is an essential aspect of this as it serves to remind everyone of the blessings they have and the importance of helping those less fortunate.

The cuisine of Iran is as diverse and varied as the nation itself, with each region boasting its own culinary specialties. However, there are several dishes and ingredients that are en-



People gather over a table of iftar in the holy city of Qom.

joyed across the country during iftar. Some of the traditional Iranian foods that you can expect to find on the iftar table are: 1. Dates and nuts: It is a tradition in Iran as in many Muslim countries to break the fast with dates and water. This practice is said to be based on Prophet Muhammad's own iftar habits. Consuming dates not only provide an instant energy boost, but they are also rich in nutrients such as potassium, magnesium, and fiber. Nuts like almonds, walnuts and pista-

chios are also common during iftar as they are an excellent source of protein and healthy fats. 2. Ash Reshteh: This hearty soup is made with Persian noodles, various types of beans, lentils and fresh herbs like parsley, coriander, and spinach. The soup is then garnished with caramelized onions, mint and dollop of kashk (a type of whey). Ash Reshteh is a popular dish during Ramadan as it is both nutritious and filling. 3. Sholeh Zard: This sweet saffron rice pudding is a traditional

dessert enjoyed during iftar. Made with rice, sugar, saffron and rosewater, it is garnished with cinnamon, cardamom, and slivered almonds. Sholeh Zard is not only a delicious way to end a meal but also a symbol of joy and celebration. 4. Halim: One of the most beloved dishes during Ramadan in Iran is Halim, a comforting and nutritious porridge that is particularly popular after iftar. Halim is a slow-cooked, savory blend of wheat, meat (usually lamb or beef) and a variety of aromatic spices such as cinnamon and turmeric. The dish is cooked for several hours, allowing the flavors to meld and the meat to become incredibly tender, resulting in smooth velvety texture.

The slow-cooking process not only imparts a rich depth of flavor of Halim but also ensures that the dish is easily digestible, making it an ideal choice for breaking the fast. The high protein and fiber content of Halim makes it a satisfying meal that provides sustained energy throughout the night, which is particularly important for those who wake up for suhoor, the pre-dawn meal before the day's fast begins.

Iranians Observe Day of Nature Amid Ramadan



Families at a park in Tehran. This year, because of the coincidence of Nowruz and the holy month of Ramadan, people celebrated the Day of Nature at their iftar tables.

TEHRAN -- Iranians have observed the Day of Nature (also known as Sizzdah-bedar) that marks the 13th and last day of Nowruz holiday.

Sizzdah-bedar is marked on the 13th day of Farvardin, the first month of the Persian calendar, and the final day of Nowruz holiday, which starts on March 20 or 21.

This year, Sizzdah-bedar fell on Sunday. Sizzdah-bedar means 13 outdoors in Persian, and is usually marked by having picnics outdoors with family and friends, and having special food such as kebab and Ash reshteh.

As the festival coincided with the holy fasting month of Ramadan when Muslims abstain from eating and drinking

from dawn to sunset, this year, people just headed to parks and green spaces in the evening to celebrate the festival.

On Sizzdah-bedar, people throw their Sabzeh (freshly grown greens), which they kept on Nowruz's Haftseen table, into a river or wherever water flows.

Nowruz is an ancient festival that marks the arrival of spring and the Persian New Year.

Iranians mark Nowruz by setting the Haftseen, a table with seven symbolic items starting with the Persian /s/ sound, including Sabzeh (freshly grown greens), Samanu (a sweet pudding made from germinated wheat), Senjed (a dried fruit), Seeb (apple), Seer (garlic), Somaq (sumac), and Serkeh (vinegar).

UK to Return Smuggled Iranian Carving of Sassanid Era



Dr St John Simpson of the British Museum with the looted Sasanian rock relief.

TEHRAN – The charge d'affaires of Iran to London, Seyed Muhammad Hussein Matin, has said that sculptural relief belonging to the Sassanid era will return to Iran after three months on display at the British Museum.

"We sincerely hope that further expansion of cooperation between the British Museum and the Iranian Embassy in London would continue to be effective in fighting against illicit trafficking of cultural properties and protect the cultural heritage of mankind," he wrote in a tweet post.

It was carved almost 2,000 years ago and is such an important sculpture that if it appeared on the art market today it could fetch more than £30 million, British daily the Observer wrote.

But this is a previously unrecorded antiquity that can never be sold. For the large fragment of a Sasanian rock relief – which depicts an imposing male figure carved in the 3rd century AD – has been freshly gouged from a

cliff in Iran with an angle grinder.

It was heading for the black market in Britain when it was seized at Stansted airport. Border Force officers became suspicious when they saw its haphazard packaging, perhaps intended to suggest that it was a worthless item. The antiquity, which is over one meter in height, was hacked out of living rock or rock that has been carved in situ.

Dr St John Simpson, a senior curator and archaeologist in the British Museum's department of the Middle East, said: "We almost never come across a case of something being cut out of the 'living rock'. That's a level of brutality that surpasses anything.

"You've even got felt-tip marks on the back before they've used an angle grinder to slice diagonally behind it and across the top. It was then packed in an incredibly bad manner, in a small, almost unpadding crate held together with nails.

"If it had been a state-of the-

art art-handling type crate, that would have attracted a different sort of attention because it required all sorts of paperwork." He has identified it as a unique rock relief sculpture dating to the period of the Sasanian empire, AD224-651.

"It belongs to a period when Iran was the centre of a powerful empire stretching from Syria to the Caucasus and Central Asia, and with its capital at Ctesiphon, south of present-day Baghdad," he said. "The Sasanians were powerful rivals of Rome, and famous today for their fine silverwares and cut glass."

As it was carved from a calcareous limestone, which is found across Iran, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact location. There are only about 30 known Sasanian rock reliefs in existence, mostly dating to the third century. Almost all are in a relatively small part of Iran, in their ancestral homeland of Fars province.

Simpson said: "We suspect it comes from somewhere in the Shiraz area. Stylistically, it is similar to one known in the region. I think it probably is part of a big sequence. There might be more bits out there.

"The lack of an inscription makes it impossible to identify the person depicted, but his dress and diademed headdress signifies him as a person of high rank. His gesture of greeting and submission, with a raised bent forefinger, is a feature of Sasanian art when figures are in the presence of royalty, which suggests that this was part of a larger composi-

tion, with the king to the right and perhaps other figures behind."

The relief had broken into two because it had been so badly packed. The British Museum has now had it repaired by conservators.

"It looks amazing," Simpson said. "It is stunningly attractive. The valuation could be anything, really. We're talking £20 million to £30 million-plus. There's never been anything like it on the market."

He said the artifact would be "incredibly valuable" on the

black market. Looters were apparently undeterred by severe penalties in place if they are caught, he added. "In Iran, they still have the death penalty for trafficking of antiquities. People have been tried and executed in Iran within the last couple of decades.

"But in the last few years, we've seen more Iranian material. So that means that people are willing and able to break the sanctions."

The case has been investigat-

ed by Interpol and the National Crime Agency, but no arrests have been made so far, although the packaging stipulated the sender, recipient and destination – a UK internet auction site, which said that it was not expecting it.

After the object was formally forfeited to the Crown, the British Museum received permission from the Iranian government to display it for three months before sending it to the National Museum in Tehran, the Observer wrote.

Picture of the Day



The Shadegan International Wetland' is a series of Ramsar wetlands in Khuzestan Province, Iran. The ponds and surrounding marshes are fed by the Karun river and are connected to the Persian Gulf.