

# US refuses visa to Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami

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Internationally acclaimed Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami was recently denied a visa to enter the United States, having applied in response to an invitation from officials at the New York Film Festival to attend this year's event (September 27-October 13). After an appearance at the festival screening of his new film *Ten*, he was scheduled to lecture at Harvard and Ohio State universities.

Kiarostami, 62, who won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes film Festival for his 1997 movie, *A Taste of Cherry*, has written and directed some 30 films. *Ten* is the fourth film by Mr. Kiarostami to have been selected for screening by the New York festival. A festival representative revealed that two Chinese filmmakers also had difficulty obtaining visas, but ultimately received them. The esteemed Iranian artist has visited the US without entry problems at least seven times in the past decade.

Officials at the US Embassy in Paris, where Kiarostami had applied for the visa, told festival organizers that they would require 90 days to investigate the filmmaker's background. According to festival spokeswoman Ines Aslan, organizers pleaded with the embassy to make an exception for the filmmaker whose background, both artistically and politically, is a matter of public record. "It wasn't that they could not make an exception. It was that they did not choose to. It is very sad," stated Aslan.

"Getting visas for Iranians has never been easy," said New York Film Festival Director Richard Peña. "This time we were told it would take three months. It used to take about 30 days." Peña, through the Film Society of Lincoln Center, sought the visa in conjunction with the two universities involved. "It seems to me that policies that deny or make difficult visas are very shortsighted and counterproductive, especially at a time when we

need more contact with the Muslim world, particularly their finest artists and thinkers," said Peña.

In a further statement, the festival director declared: "It's a terrible sign of what's happening in my country today that no one seems to realize or care about the kind of negative signal this sends out to the entire Muslim world (not to mention to everyone else)."

In a recent letter to Peña, Kiarostami commented: "I certainly do not deserve an entry visa any more than the aging mother hoping to visit her children in the U.S. perhaps for the last time in her life.... For my part, I feel this decision is somehow what I deserve."

Jack Lang, minister of education and culture in the former Socialist Party government, attempted in vain to intercede on Kiarostami's behalf with the American ambassador in Paris, Howard Leach. Lang, a French cultural nationalist did not miss the opportunity to take a swipe at the US, commenting that the Kiarostami visa denial represented "an intellectual isolationism and ... contempt for other cultures."

The WWSW spoke to a US State Department representative who said that "scrutiny had increased substantially since the September 11 attacks on New York City, Washington and Pennsylvania, particularly with immigrants from countries such as Iran, known to have links to terrorism. The 90-day background check is an estimate, not a specific law, which does not have to be applied to all cases."

Another victimization of a renowned Iranian film director took place in April 2001, when Jafar Panahi (a sometime collaborator of Kiarostami) was viciously man-handled by US immigration officials during a stopover in New York City while in route from Hong Kong to film festivals in South America. Upon his arrival at JFK airport, immigration police took him to an office where he was chained to a bench for hours

because he refused to be photographed or fingerprinted solely because of his nationality. After a harrowing ordeal, he was brought in chains to a plane that was going back to Hong Kong.

In an Open Letter to the National Board of Review of Motion pictures (see full text) Panahi wrote: “In the plane and from my window, I could see New York ... I saw the Statue of Liberty in the waters, and I unconsciously smiled. I tried to draw the curtain and there were scars of the chain on my hand. I could not stand the other travelers gazing at me and just wanted to stand up and cry that I’m not a thief! I’m not a murderer! I’m not a drug dealer!... I am just an Iranian, a filmmaker.”

The refusal by US immigration officials to grant Kiarostami a visa is another attack by the Bush administration on the democratic rights of noncitizens and citizens alike in the name of the “war on terrorism.” Moreover, it is part of the ongoing attempt to smear the entire population of the Middle East and Central Asia as potential terrorists. This functions, in the first place, to further justify American military intervention in the region at a time of an impending assault on Iraq. As a member of Bush’s “axis of evil,” furthermore, Iran itself is clearly one of Washington’s future potential targets. Poisoning public opinion against an Iranian filmmaker serves that longer-term goal.



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