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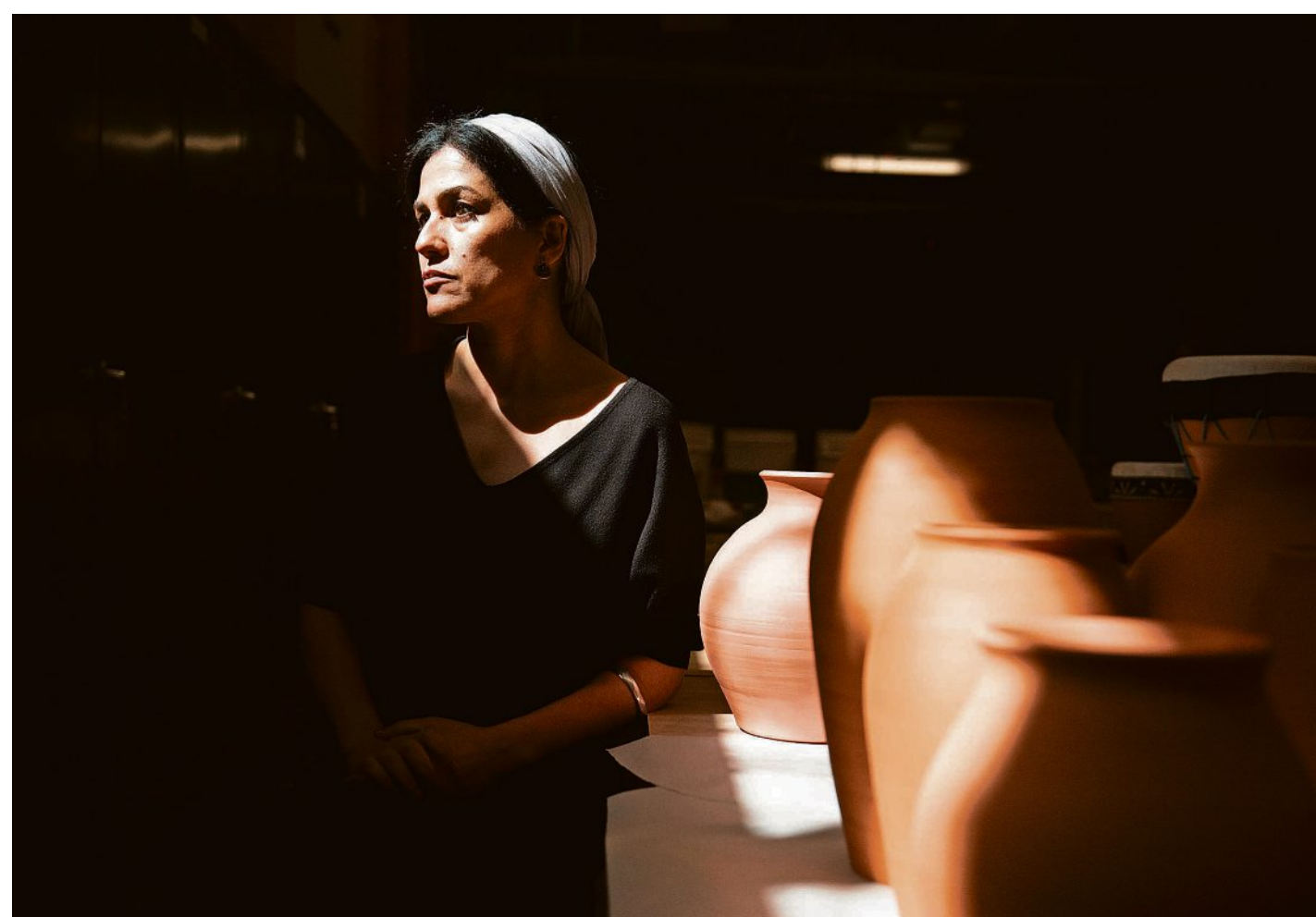
# THE TENNESSEAN

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Raheleh Filsoofi sits for a portrait in her studio at Vanderbilt in Nashville on March 12.  
PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN

## Channeling their pain into art as war rages

### Nashville's Iranian, Kurdish artists turn to music

**Audrey Gibbs**  
Nashville Tennessean  
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

In Iran, Israeli and American strikes have killed more than 1,200 civilians, including 110 deaths in the country's Kurdistan province. Meanwhile, Iran's capital, Tehran, remains a major conflict hotspot.

Tehran is where Nashville-based artist Raheleh Filsoofi met her husband, Reza Filsoofi, more than two decades ago.

The Filsoofis left Tehran for North

See **ARTISTS**, Page 15A



Raheleh Filsoofi and Reza Filsoofi work together to prepare clay in her studio March 12.

**"Music has always brought people together. The world really needs it right now."**

**Soheill**  
Iranian American alt-rocker

## Bible, Israel legislation could cost up to \$37M

### Bill would require courses in TN schools

**Angele Latham**  
Nashville Tennessean  
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

A bill before the Tennessee General Assembly that would require Bible education for K-12 students at public schools could cost taxpayers millions.

Rep. Gino Bulso's "Protecting Religious Liberty and Expression in Public Schools" act would create time in public schools for "voluntary vocal prayer" and require curriculum about Israeli history, the Bible and its influence on western civilization.

Textbooks for the new curriculum could cost between \$18 million and \$37 million, according to Bulso.

That would not include any potential litigation costs, local implementation costs or potentially lost federal education funding due to violating current federal rules.



**Bulso**

Participation in the prayer time would require a written consent form, while the Bible instruction – required to be taught as literature and history, and not "religious dogma" – allows students to opt out if requested by a parent.

"This bill goes beyond current code with regards to the use of the Bible, because it makes it a requirement that the Bible be taught to all children K-12," Bulso, a Brentwood Republican, said before the Civil Justice Subcommittee Feb. 4. "It is not voluntary on the part of local educational agencies. We are, as a state, saying that the Bible is such an important part of education, when taught as history and literature."

The bill seeks to severely limit the

See **LEGISLATION**, Page 17A

## SPORTS, 1B



### Estes: My March Madness bracket

## WAR WITH IRAN

# Trump urges nations to join Iran war

### Calls on countries to help open Strait of Hormuz

**Dinah Voyles Pulver, Christopher Cann, Bart Jansen, Andrea Riquier, Kate Perez and James Powel**  
USA TODAY

President Donald Trump on March 16 "strongly urged" nations who rely on the Strait of Hormuz for oil shipments to

"get involved with us" quickly and "with great enthusiasm" to guard the waterway as oil prices stayed at \$100 a barrel amid the ongoing Iran war.

The president, during an event at the White House, said that he'd been a critic of protecting allied nations because he did not believe they would help the United States if it came under crisis.

"We strongly encourage the other nations to get involved with us, and get involved quickly, and with great enthusiasm," Trump said. "I have that from a number of them."

Trump declined to say which countries he's speaking to about working to guard the strait, saying they may not want him to share their names

See **TRUMP**, Page 17A

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# Artists

Continued from Page 1A

America years back, living in Florida and Texas before finally settling in Nashville in 2021. Since then, they've become one of Nashville's most notable artistic couples.

Now, Tehran has become a ghost town. Its buildings are in ruins. Residents face a battered economy. A digital blackout shrouds the region.

For Raheleh, an assistant professor of ceramics at Vanderbilt University, and Reza, a multi-instrumentalist and drum-maker, the impact of war in their home country is deeply psychological.

"Many people in Iran had already endured years of hardship and loss during protests and political unrest, and now the fear of further violence adds another layer of uncertainty," Raheleh said.

"Even from far away, those events shape our daily lives."

The Filsoofis are among Music City's community of Middle Eastern artists who are channeling their pain into art. Across the city, Kurdish keyboardist Arkan Doski and Iranian American alt-rockers Soheill do the same.

"Art does not necessarily change the world, but it changes how we see and feel the world," Raheleh continued. "It can remind us of our shared humanity."

Here's a glimpse into the lives of Nashville's most prominent Iranian and Kurdish artists as they approach a bittersweet, springtime holiday that Persians celebrate on March 20, and Kurdish Tennesseans, on March 21.

## The Filsoofi family honors Iranian culture through clay drums

The Filsoofis mixed, strained and poured buckets of dirt and clay at Raheleh's Vanderbilt studio.

Around them stood dozens of vessels, which Raheleh crafted from clay she collected around Nashville.

Reza had stretched goat skin over their tops, transforming the pieces to darbukkass, goblet drums central to Middle Eastern folk music.

The drums will play a major role in the couple's performance in celebration of Nowruz, Persian New Year's day.

Among a group of artists, the Filsoofis will present an afternoon of music, poetry and rhythm at the Frist Art Museum on March 22: "Resonance of the Land: Nowruz Between Renewal and Loss."

"While Nowruz traditionally is about renewal and hope, the difficult events of the past year around the world have also brought a sense of mourning," Raheleh said. The performance will honor lives lost in recent months.

Raheleh, age 50, and Reza, 52, grew up during the Iranian Revolution, times of severe social unrest and restrictions on women's rights.

"During the years of revolution and war in Iran, art, poetry and music offered places of refuge and reflection," Raheleh said. She began working with clay in Tehran as a young crafting student.

"Clay is the oldest medium," she said. "Through it, we know the human history. This is my medium because it connects me to the past, the present and also the future. This is a medium that lasts forever."

Raheleh's work is currently on display at the Frist as a part of the "In Her Place" exhibition, which highlights 28 of Nashville's women artists.

On the other hand, Reza Filsoofi learned his first instrument, santoor, a hammered dulcimer, as a boy.

He was living in Kashan, an ancient city in Iran's Isfahan province. Since there were no teachers in the city, he would stay with his grandmother in Tehran for lessons.

Now, he's a virtuoso of setar, daf, tonbak and more, creating soulful compositions propelled by improvisation and spirituality.

Music is what first brought the couple together; Raheleh signed up for a daf class with Reza, who taught her how to play the large frame drum.

Though much of their family remains in Iran, the couple believed it was their calling to leave. Together, they observe, document and share art that exists at the intersections of American and Iranian culture.

The Filsoofis noticed early on that, although Nashville is fueled by music, there are limited platforms for global musical traditions in town. As such, Reza feels a responsibility to expand Nashville's musical traditions.

"Music can honor its roots while still speaking to people across cultures," he said.

In 2024, the couple founded the Nashville Immigrant and Refugee Music and Art (NIRMA) Project, highlighting immigrant stories through art.

Nashville is home to many immigrant and refugee communities who creatively contribute to the city, they said. There are thousands of people across Tennessee that identify as Persian. As such, Ira-



Arkan Doski talks about traditional Kurdish music on March 6 in Smyrna. Doski, a Kurdish musician, is trying to preserve the traditional music and culture. MARK ZALESKI/THE TENNESSEAN



Music artist Soheill sits for a portrait at his home in Nashville on March 9. DENNY SIMMONS/THE TENNESSEAN



Reza Filsoofi assists his wife, Raheleh Filsoofi, in her studio at Vanderbilt in Nashville on March 12. NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN

nian-Americans are now one part of Nashville's larger story.

"We cannot learn from distance and through media," Raheleh said. "When art and music are offered, it is an invitation to listen, to ask questions and to connect."

## Kurdish music creator Arkan Doski brings joy to Newroz

Arkan Doski is one of the most highly sought-after Kurdish musicians in Nashville.

Nashville is the home to the largest Kurdish populations outside of the Middle East, a lively community of about 20,000 people. For weddings, festivals and parties in the Kurdish community, Doski is the hottest headlining act.

He'll be especially busy this season with Newroz, Kurdish New Year, celebrations.

"If it ain't us, it's not gonna be a show," Doski said, sitting in his Smyrna home studio among rows of keyboards.

The Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without a sovereign state, which runs through Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

In 1976, Kurdish refugees began being resettled in Nashville. In the '90s, many Kurds fled Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign in Iraq. Now, several Kurdish regions are major areas of conflict.

Iranian drones have targeted Kurdish fighters in Iraq, while American and Israeli attacks harmed Kurdish communities in Iran. Even so, some Kurds have considered joining the fight against the regime in Tehran.

Doski left Kurdistan around age 4.

His family moved to Nashville from a refugee camp in Turkey when he was 7.

Across borders, music is a uniting force for the Kurdish people. Doski learned his keyboard skills from his father, who taught him the quarter tone scales, vivid rhythms, and rich and danceable songs of the Kurdish tradition. Rhythms are named after Kurdish villages, so when people hear certain beats, they know their origins.

It's hard to pass down the distinct musical style while living away from Kurdistan, Doski said.

The Kurdish piano scales are different than American ones; many players have to pick them up by ear. Doski does what he can to keep his family's tradition alive by teaching his own son the techniques, just as his father taught him.

"Music has been inside my family," he said. "I don't want to be the last one."

Keeping up with the changing musical scene in Kurdistan is another challenge.

Doski has to upgrade keyboards constantly to work on similar software as his musician friends in Kurdistan, who send him the region's new beats and popular sounds. "I have to stay on top of it," he said, describing the challenges of satisfying his diverse Kurdish audiences in Tennessee.

Throughout it all, Doski is still in regular communication with his family members back home.

"Though the war is on Iran, they're over there in Northern Iraq. No one over there with electricity," he said. "They're seeing all these weapons up in the air above their heads. They don't know

what's going to happen. It can hit them at any time, and they're not even involved."

Doski will be performing at the Nashville Nowruz Festival on March 21 at the James E. Ward Agricultural Center. This year's celebration is going to be "very complicated," he said.

"We've had harder times, but we're all in the same pain," he said, explaining the Kurdish community in town is extremely bonded.

As an artist, he wants to use music to help manage that pain.

"Not make it too hyper and not make it too sad, just kind of make it level out," he said. "Forget about it for a little bit."

## Soheill shares Persian storytelling with a guitar

Soheill, a songwriter, producer, and multi-instrumentalist born Soheil Najjarian, will never forget the first time he saw a guitar.

"In Iran, there's a lot of Western things that are illegal. You don't have bars. If you want to go to a party, you have to keep it down," he said, sitting in his backyard in Nashville.

People would pay off the cops and sneak alcohol into house parties with suitcases. "And Persians love to party," he added.

At these parties, Soheill would watch his town's top classical guitarist all night long, unable to peel himself away.

In Iran, where modern music was only performed behind closed doors, Soheill's early musical experiences weren't just entertainment. They fostered connection and resistance.

At age 7, Soheill and his family left Iran for California. Amid the Iran-Iraq war, Soheill's parents left because they wanted to give him a better life.

In the U.S., Soheill was able to dive fully into his passion for rock 'n' roll, inspired by Radiohead, Nine Inch Nails, Bob Dylan and Depeche Mode. He fronted bands in Southern California before moving to Nashville in 2017 and launching a solo career.

Now, living in Nashville, Soheill blends an atmospheric alternative sound with storytelling lyrics, addressing themes of straddling two worlds in his work.

"The Iranian culture is really rich in poetry and there's a lot of depth in the culture. I try to tap into that energy when I'm writing music," he said.

"Nashville is one of the few places where songwriting is truly respected as a craft. That culture pushes you to constantly improve."

His 2018 track "Supernatural" captures his mom's persistence during the complicated immigration process.

Soheill's 2024 song "False Freedom" is inspired by Iranian women's courage as they fought for rights and publicly took off their hijabs.

Unrest has been present in Iran for a long time, Soheill said, but the last few months have been especially heavy. This Nowruz, Soheill is navigating the emotional weight by prioritizing gratitude.

"A lot of people in America don't quite realize what true oppression is like ... This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for Iranians to have freedom," he said. It's a time to pay attention closely."

And one way to help people pay attention, despite the distance? Music.

"Music has always brought people together. The world really needs it right now," he said.

"I feel this sense that I need to create right now."

Audrey Gibbs is a music journalist at *The Tennessean*. You can reach her at [agibbs@tennessean.com](mailto:agibbs@tennessean.com).