

# Iranian-Canadian Artist Denied Entry to US for San Francisco Performance

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## Arts



Morehshin Allahyari (standing) and Shirin Fahimi (seated) during a performance-lecture at Floating University and Projekt Bauhaus, Berlin, 2018. (Photo by Tanja Katharina Lindner)

Iranian-Canadian artist [Shirin Fahimi](#), scheduled to perform on Friday at San Francisco's CounterPulse, was denied entry to the United States on Tuesday. Her two-person performance with [Morehshin Allahyari](#) will continue, says co-presenting arts nonprofit Southern Exposure, as "a resilient, unbending adaptation of the original piece."

Fahimi was scheduled to take a direct flight from Toronto to San Francisco when she was stopped by Toronto-based U.S. border officials, questioned and not allowed to board her flight. Fahimi, who was born in Iran, is a Canadian citizen and carries a Canadian passport. Canadian citizens do not require visas to visit the U.S. and Fahimi has traveled here many times since 2018 without issue, a [joint announcement](#) from Counterpulse and Southern Exposure explained.

Her performance with New York-based Allahyari, titled *Breaching Towards Other Futures*, sources material from Middle Eastern mythology and is staged in conjunction with Southern Exposure's ongoing exhibition *Where do you want ghosts to reside?*

Fahimi posted about the events on social media, writing, “Sharing this experience in case someone else has a similar situation.” She detailed the process of going through passport check and getting called into a security room filled with monitors showing her own image. During questioning by a U.S. official, Fahimi says she was asked if she is Muslim, why she immigrated to Canada, if she was happy with the Iranian government and why her husband’s family name is so long.

“Have you ever been asked what is your religion when crossing the border?” she wrote on Instagram. “Have you ever needed to explain your spiritual existence for your trip to the U.S.?”

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Local arts organizations have noted a rise in both the delay and denial of artist visas in recent years, coinciding with President Trump’s policy of “extreme vetting,” but Fahimi’s situation is different—no paperwork is necessary for Canadian citizens to travel to the United States. Yet, an internal memo recently obtained by CNN suggests that Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers working in Canadian ports of entry were directed to detain and question travelers of Iranian descent in early January, following the death of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

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Brittney Rezaei, an immigrants’ rights attorney for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, explains there is an exemption in President Trump’s travel ban that applies to dual citizens like Fahimi, but that CBP has a lot of discretion and authority to decide if a person can enter the country. “The policies of CBP and ICE are effecting more and more people,” she says, including students and artists.

“Once denied, it is generally harder for a person to come into the U.S. the next time,” Rezaei says. Experiences like Fahimi’s make people afraid to travel, she notes. “It makes them feel like there’s something wrong with who they are. It silences the sharing of information, especially the exchange of art and culture.”

“Part of what’s so hard is that we don’t know what happened,” says Margaret McCarthy, Southern Exposure’s executive director and co-director. “We don’t know what to do differently next time. We’re certainly not interested in becoming more conservative or timid in the artists we work with or that the curatorial council invites to participate.” *Where do you want ghosts to reside?* and *Breaching Towards Other Futures* were curated by artists Azin Seraj and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

In the announcement, Southern Exposure and CounterPulse took a firm stance on the U.S. government’s policies regarding Iran and its citizens. “What we do know is that the work that the current White House administration is doing to disrupt lives and dismantle

communities is fundamentally unjust and borne of generations of structural bias and hatred," the statement reads.

"This is a traumatic experience, I think, for Shirin to go through this kind of questioning and for both artists to face this kind of obstacle in creating their work," says Valerie Imus, Southern Exposure's artistic director and co-director. "But they're both incredibly strong and thoughtful people and have forged ahead and have created a brand new variation on this piece that responds to this moment."

Fahimi and Allahyari are working to create a new version of their performance, which will take place tonight at CounterPulse, as scheduled. Fahimi will Skype in live to participate.

As Imus says, "They are doing the simple and radical act of continuing to make art at this moment."

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