Ahwazi Arabs

STATISTICS

Status: Indigenous Arab people within the province of Al-Ahwaz (officially known as Khuzestan) are a national, ethnic, linguistic and a cultural minority.

Population: Al-Ahwaz: 5.7 million (according 2009 estimate based on 2002 government census) which approx 4 million are Arabs. There are about 2 million Ahwazi Arab war (Iran-Iraq) refugees in other provinces.

Capital City: Ahwaz

Area: 89,000 km²

Language: Arabic

Religion: Shi’a 70%, Sunni 24%, others 1%

Ethnic Groups: Arab (75%), Persian, Lurs, Jewish, Christian

UNPO REPRESENTATION

The Democratic Solidarity Party of Ahwaz (DSPA) is the representative of the region of Al-Ahwaz in UNPO. The DSPA was admitted to UNPO in 2003.
OVERVIEW

The Ahwazi Arabs are one of the largest minority groups within Iran and are predominantly situated in the Al-Ahwaz province. Al-Ahwaz, also known as Arabistan or Khuzestan, is situated in the southwestern part of Iran. It borders Basra province, Iraq in the west, the Gulf, Shat al-Arab Waterway, and the province of Dashestan in the south, and the mountains of Lurestan and Kurdistan in the north and east respectively. Its capital is the city of Ahwaz. Nearly 90% of Iran’s oil originates from Al-Ahwaz, due to its location at the tip of the Gulf and the Shat al-Arab waterway. The Karoun River, Iran’s largest river, flows through Al-Ahwaz into the Gulf and is a major means of transportation through Iran. The Al-Ahwaz province is one of the most lucrative provinces because of its natural resources and shipping ability. However, despite this wealth the Ahwazi Arabs of Al-Ahwaz receive very little of the profits and many are forced to relocate due to Iranian oil and dam development.

In addition to not being compensated for the loss of their lands, the Ahwazi Arabs face continued violence and repression by the Iranian government. Since the 1980s the Iranian government has imposed several discriminatory ethnic and religious policies that have banned Sunni Ahwazi Arabs from participating in government, limited their access to education and resources, and forcing them into abject poverty. In order to silence opposition, Iranian authorities have persecuted the Ahwazi Arabs through arbitrary arrest, torture, rape, deportation and destruction of property. The United Nations, European Union, and state governments have condemned the discriminatory and violent methods the Iranian government has taken against the Ahwazi Arabs. While Iran has faced severe criticism by the United Nations Human Rights Commission and Human Rights Council more recently for its treatment of Iranian religious and ethnic minorities it remains to be seen whether change is forthcoming.

POLITICAL SITUATION

In 2005 it was revealed that the central government had been pursuing a plan of requisitioning land from Arabs in Al-Ahwaz and selling it to ethnic Persians and non-Arab businesses with zero percent loans. The displaced Ahwazis remain undercompensated, and have been forced to relocate to shanty towns in the regional capital, Ahwaz. Some Ahwazis have even been deported across the country to the northeastern city of Mashhad. A government document revealing these plans and other “Persianisation” methods was discovered in 2005 and led to massive protests and unrest in Al-Ahwaz. The government backlash was severe and led to hundreds of arrests and dozens of executions. Since 2005 every year around the anniversary of the protests there have been preemptive arrests and executions. Since January 2009, between 30 and 100 Ahwazi (the former estimate is according to official government reports, the latter to human rights groups) have been executed for purported crimes varying from drug trafficking to Mohareb: “being enemies of God”. Mohareb’s interpretation is itself ambiguous and subjective and has been extended to cover a range of crimes, from petty theft to acts of terrorism. The majority of the people targeted for these arrests and the resultant executions are young men, many of whom have been involved in political activism.
In addition to being forced from their native lands the Ahwazi Arabs have experienced severe repression through the Iranian gozinesh law, passed in 1988, which makes access to education, employment, military and governmental services conditional upon a rigorous ideological screening to assure a devotion to the state’s official ideology of Islam. Both Sunni and Shia Ahwazi Arabs suffer under this discriminatory policy as they are seen as enemies to the Iranian state and not true practitioners of Islam. Many have been denied access to basic services, while several among them have been subjected to arbitrary arrests and imprisonment.

The elections that took place on June 12th, 2009 and the Iranian government’s aggressive response against protestors is a pressing concern for the Ahwazi Arabs. In Al-Ahwaz several Ahwazi Arab homes were raided after the elections and many individuals were subject to torture and wrongful arrests. The censoring of dissidents by the Iranian government through the removal of media outlets, arrest of news reporters and use of force, rape, property destruction and imprisonment of political activists continues to plague all those who voice their political opposition.

UNPO PERSPECTIVE

UNPO supports Ahwazi calls for the Iranian authorities to observe their international legal commitments to human rights and to pay greater respect to the individual culture and environment of Al-Ahwaz.

The question of democracy, human rights, and development are key to the wellbeing of Iran’s society and nationalities, and are as important to Al-Ahwaz as elsewhere. The centralized theocracy that emerged in 1979 has refused to address these issues.

UNPO believes that realizing these aims can be best accomplished by the granting of greater regional autonomy to the region of Al-Ahwaz. This process should be driven by all Iranians, as part of peaceful domestic reform. UNPO condemns the denial of Ahwazi national and cultural identity by the Islamic Republic.

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

The Democratic Solidarity Part of Ahwaz (DSPA) aims to create a socially and politically dynamic civil society promoting the rights of the Ahwazis as a minority nationality in Iran. The DSPA does not dispute the territorial integrity of Iran but it believes Iran is a multi-national, multi-lingual and multi-cultural state. It believes in peaceful reform of the current system of governance, and the establishment of a secular, federal democratic republic in which all minorities are represented and given a voice.

DSPA is a member of the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran, an organisation of 16 regional and ethnic minorities in Iran peacefully campaigning for the autonomy of Iran’s regions within a democratic federal system.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Arab Period

Before the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century, many Arab tribes have lived in different parts of Iran, each one retaining their own identity through language, culture and religion. According to Kasravi, a well respected Iranian contemporary historian, in his book titled “500 years history of Khuzestan” and to Tabari, the first Muslim historian, the Ahwazi-Arabs have lived in Khuzestan and other parts of southern Iran since the Parthian era, 4000 years ago. In 639 AD the Islamic conquest of Persia brought Islam to the area. Control of the region of Al-Ahwaz changed from Arab to Persian control multiple times, but throughout history the region maintained a majority Arab population. Muhammad Ibn Faalah Mashaasha independently ruled Al-Ahwaz from the 15th to the second half of the 19th century. The king of Iran during the time, Nasser al-Din Shah, acknowledged the autonomy and independence of the region.

It was from 1503 onward that Al-Ahwaz came to be known as Arabestan, signifying its Arab character as well as its Arab inhabitants. During this time the Al-Ahwaz enjoyed considerable autonomy as they were separated from the imperial power by the Zagros mountain chain. The local Arab sheiks were largely independent and the region was ethnically distinct from the rest of Persia.

Pahlavi Dynasty

By the end of the 18th century, the Bani Kaab tribe replaced the Mashaashaid as the new rulers of Khuzestan. Bani-Kaab ruled Arabistan until Sheikh Khazaal, the last Arab ruler, was removed from power in 1925. With the support of British officials, Reza Shah was placed into power. Reza Shah immediately began to forcibly settle the tribal groups of Al-Ahwaz, which presented a considerable conflict as the groups were traditionally semi-nomadic. Tehran commenced a heavy centralization process, imposing Farsi as the official language and banning the teaching of Arabic in schools. This centralization was exacerbated in 1936 when Al-Ahwaz was renamed Khuzestan by the central Iranian government, further attempting to deny the Arab identity of the province. Thus the Iranian government was able to put an end to the last autonomous province and emirate in the area and bring Arabistan (Al-Ahwaz) under its control.

Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War

Due to the endemic corruption and autocratic rule of the government, the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown and replaced by the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran. However, the policies of the Islamic Republic, like its predecessor, were based on the elimination of the national identity of Ahwazi-Arabs and other nationalities such as the Turks, Kurds, Baloch and Turkmen. Upon its ascendancy to power, the Islamic government responded severely and immediately cracked down on all federalist movements. Many ethnic minorities, including the Ahwazi, used this occasion to demand better representation and more auton-
omy from the new government. Systematic human rights breaches followed, on one day following the 1979 revolution, more than 800 unarmed Arab Ahwazis were killed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Islamic Republic did not alter the previous regime’s centralist policies towards Al-Ahwaz, and the Ahwazi Arab people have remained under political, cultural, social and economic control ever since.

In September 1980, following a long history of border disputes, fear of Shia terrorism and the desire of Iraq to become the dominant Gulf state, the Iran-Iraq War began with Iraqi forces invading Al-Ahwazi. While non-local inhabitants of Khuzestan escaped the war ravaged province to their original homeland, Ahwazis were subjected to the destruction of their homes, farms and lived under bombardments for eight years. Throughout this time the United Nations Security Council worked for a ceasefire, but it was not until 1988 that this was achieved and the last prisoners of war were not exchanged until 2003.

It is estimated that over a half of a million Iraqi and Iranian soldiers as well as civilians are believed to have died in the war with many more injured or wounded. At least 12,000 Ahwazi Arab conscripted soldiers in the Iranian Army died defending Iran’s border from the Iraqi invasion. However, despite their service and opposition to the Iraqi invasion, the Ahwazi Arabs have been labeled as terrorists and enemies to the Iranian state. The Iranian gozinesh law that was passed in 1988 was a direct effort by the Iranian government to weaken and repress the Arab minority within the state. Since then the Ahwazi Arabs have faced continued harassment, terror and discrimination by the Iranian government.

2009 Iranian Elections

On June 12th 2009 Iran held its tenth presidential election in which the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was set against three challengers. The months preceding the vote saw increased repression, particularly against members of Iran’s religious and ethnic minorities, students, trade unions, and women’s rights activists. The censuring of the population created an intense situation leading up to the election. Presidential debates and information were restricted to only the state media. Many candidates were disqualified from running, leaving just four to contest for the presidency. Despite the limitations imposed by the Iranian government to discourage people, many individuals went out and voted. By the next morning the Islamic Republic News Agency, the official state news agency, announced that with only two-thirds of the votes counted, Ahmadinejad had won the election with 62% of the vote. However, within hours of the announcement outrage had erupted on the streets amongst widespread claims of voting fraud. The three defeated candidates alleged that President Ahmadinejad had ordered the fraud and voting discrimination. The government’s response was swift and severe with the blocking of satellite transmissions, internet access, banning of foreign journalists, and the severing of telecommunications infrastructure.
By the end of that week Iran’s Supreme Leader had ordered security forces to use violence and arbitrary arrests to suppress opposition. At this time ethnic minorities became targets of the Iranian military crackdown. Hundreds of Ahwazi Arab homes were raided and many innocent Ahwazis were taken into custody. It is estimated that at least 4,000 people were arrested during post-election unrest in Tehran, however several other arrests were recorded in Al-Ahwaz. The majority of those arrested were soon released, but many were held for weeks and some are still being held. It is still unknown how many Ahwazi Arabs were arrested and detained as the Iranian government continues to censor this information. According to international and local human rights groups, including Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, at least 780 Ahwazi-Arab known political organizers remain in prison from the 2009 elections.

CURRENT ISSUES

1. Economic Situation

According to the Iranian government, Al-Ahwaz ranks third in Iran’s provinces in terms of GDP, largely due to its oil. The Yadavaran Field, one of the richest oil reserves in Iran, is located in Al-Ahwaz. The field is estimated to have up to 17 billion barrels of oil. In 2009 the Iranian government negotiated a 70 billion dollar deal with the Chinese company, Sinopec, in which the company would hold a 51% stake in the field’s development and the Chinese government would agree to buy 10 million metric tons of natural gas from the Iran. In 2007 development in the Yadavaran Field finally began and it is already estimated to make up to 185,000 barrels per day. However, the benefits of the rich natural resources of Al-Ahwaz do not reach the average Ahwazi citizen. Ahwazi Arab unemployment rates are officially between 15-20%, and illiteracy is above 50%. A million of the roughly 4 million Ahwazi Arabs live in urban slums, and more Ahwazi houses are destroyed every year by authorities to make room for government-sponsored business projects.

Several Ahwazi Arab oil and gas workers have also been victims to the discriminatory policies of the Iranian administration. It has been reported that since 2009, the Iranian government started discharging all mid and high level Ahwazi Arabs from oil, gas, petrochemical and steel industries in Khuzestan to further intimidate Arabs and discourage their solidarity with the Kurdish, Baloch Human Rights movements in Tehran. Firings have been reported in several oil, gas, chemical and steel refineries, such as Abadan Petrochemical Complex, Razi Chemical (Bandar Imam Petrochemical), the Ahwaz Steel Plant, Ahwaz Carbon Black Plants and many others.

In addition to oil Al-Ahwaz is known as one of the agriculturally richest regions in Iran. The Karoun River flows directly through the province offering a renewable source of fresh water as well as shipping and trading routes through Iran and into the Persian Gulf. However, one of the greatest threats to the Ahwazi people has been the diversion of...
the Karoun River by the Iranian government in order to fuel massive oil and factory developments with hydro-electric energy and water. The diversion of the Karoun River has caused massive ecological devastation to the already impoverished countryside as marshlands have been turned into saltwater fields and the land has become desert. The loss of usable agricultural land has led to the severe malnutrition and high infant mortality rates in the Ahwazi population.

2. Human Rights

Like most human rights activists in Iran, those in Al-Ahwaz face constant oppression from the government, including arrests where torture and ill-treatment are routine and trial without access to legal representation. Moreover, due to their ethnicity, some are also falsely identified as separatists by the central government, which has maintained a suspicious stance towards Ahwazi Arabs ever since the Iran-Iraq war, despite the thousands that gave their lives during that war. Tehran still perceives them as being disloyal and infiltrated by foreign countries trying to destabilize Iran. In this sense, the mobilization of minority representation has been considered secessionist and strongly resisted by the authorities, despite the fact that Iran is a multi-ethnic country and the repeated Ahwazi affirmations to respect the territorial integrity of Iran.

Since the mass demonstrations in Al-Ahwaz in 2005 there have been multiple instances of Ahwazi activists being imprisoned with little explanation, charged with *mohareb*, "being enemies of God". They are generally denied legal representation, and even in instances where lawyers are consulted, Iranian law is not properly followed. In many of these cases, the prisoners have been executed without any prior notification, contrary to the law stating that a prisoner and their legal counsel are entitled to 48 hours notification, and further objection, before execution.

Many Ahwazi living abroad have applied for refugee status from UNHCR and have received permission to travel to safe countries. There have been many instances in the past five years where Ahwazis granted refugee status living in Syria and Lebanon have been deported back to Iran to face criminal charges. Many of them have been detained indefinitely or executed. There are no official figures recorded of Ahwazi refugees put in this situation. The DSPA and other Ahwazi organizations have called for the Geneva Convention principle of non-refoulement to be applied when nations are working with Ahwazi refugees.

According to the Ahwazi Human Rights Organisation (AHRO), since the 2005 Ahwazi Intifada began, over 5,000 Ahwazis have been arrested, at least 131 have been killed and over 150 have disappeared.

3. Land Appropriation

In the years during the Iran-Iraq war, the central government confiscated some of the land in order to secure the region against the Iraqi invasion. However, 22 years after the end of the war, those lands have not been reallocated to the Ahwazi Arabs who are still waiting for their return. According to the Special Reporter on Adequate Housing, in his report in 2005, there were reports of approximately 200,000 to 250,000 Arabs being displaced in Al-Ahwaz region due to the development projects being carried out by the central government. He specified that there was no prior consultation with the Ahwazi Arabs about those projects and there was no adequate resettlement or compensation.
4. Living Conditions

Despite Al-Ahwaz being one of the richest regions for natural resources in Iran and generates a large amount of profits for the Iranian government, the Ahwazi Arabs continue to live in deplorable conditions. Due to the discriminatory laws put in place by the Iranian government, that limits Ahwazi Arabs access to social services they remain one of the poorest population groups within the state. One third of the urban population lives in shanty towns that are scattered throughout Al-Ahwaz.

Many Ahwazi Arabs live in areas where unemployment can reach up to 50%. The area of Dashte-Azadegan, where the majority of the inhabitants are indigenous Ahwazi Arabs, has the highest incidence of malnutrition among children in Iran. About 80% of children in Dashte-Azadegan suffer from malnutrition, leaving them with the consequences of stunted growth, health complications, and early mortality. Meanwhile in other areas of Al-Ahwaz hundreds of Ahwazis suffer from disease and poor living conditions due to Iranian discrimination and repression. Several Ahwazi Arabs have lost their homes and farmlands to oil mining and water developments projects in the region, leaving many in a desperate state unable to support their families.

The majority of Ahwazi villages lack schools and over 70% of Ahwazi Arab students drop out from secondary school due to not being able to learn in their native language. In addition to this, vast stretches of Al-Ahwaz continue to be riddled with explosive mines and bombs left behind from the Iran-Iraq War. Several local Ahwazi people, including children, have been tragic victims to these land mines. According to a 2003 Landmine Monitoring Report by the Human Rights Watch, Khuzestan remains the “most landmine infested area” in Iran. While the Ahwazi Arabs have appealed to the Iranian government to de-mine the area, their pleas continue to be ignored.
KEY QUESTIONS

How long have Ahwazi Arabs lived in Iran?

Ahwazi Arabs were an indigenous population in Al-Ahwaz before 639 AD. Throughout the centuries the region switched from Arab to Persian control; however the local Ahwazi population has remained consistent. Before Al-Ahwaz was officially renamed Khuzestan in 1936 the region was titled Arabistan which was meant to be a representative of the large local Arab population. The Ahwazi Arabs consider themselves to be native inhabitants of Al-Ahwaz and wish for their indigenous rights of culture, language, human rights and land to be respected and protected by the Iranian government.

Are Ahwazi Arabs connected to extremists and separatists?

The Democratic Solidarity Party of Ahwaz do not consider themselves separatists. During the Iran-Iraq War the majority of the Ahwazi Arabs despite their opposition to the Islamic Republic, opposed the Iraqi invasion. Despite the accusations by the Iranian government that the Ahwazi Arabs are attached to Sunni extremists, agents working on behalf of the Israeli, US or Saudi governments, the Ahwazi Arabs have had no connection to radical extremism or violence towards the Iranian government. The goal of the Democratic Solidarity Party of Ahwaz is to gain greater autonomy of Iran's regions and transform Iran into a truly democratic federal state in which ethnic and religious minorities are equally represented and protected.

How has the International Community responded to the human rights situation in Al-Ahwaz?

The situation of Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority has remained a topic of concern for human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, as well as the European Parliament, The United Nations, the US Department of State and the International Federation for Human Rights. Since 2005 several reports have been published by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch regarding the ethnic genocide of Ahwazi Arabs by the Iranian government. Recently the United Nations Human Rights Council condemned the actions of the Iranian government during the 2009 elections and its aftermath. While the plight of the Ahwazi Arabs has received greater international attention, the Iranian government has consistently refused to recognize Iranian Arab rights and instead continues to harshly repress them.

CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Language

The people of Al-Ahwaz historically speak a dialect of Arabic identical to that spoken in Iraq. Ever since Reza Shah's centralization and annexation of Al-Ahwaz in 1925, Farsi (Persian) has been the official language of the state and no other languages are taught in school or used by the government. Many Ahwazi Arabs drop out of school because they are forced to learn Farsi, and access to government positions is limited for native-Arab speakers from Al-Ahwaz.
Religion

Currently it is estimated that about 70-80% of Ahwazi Arabs are Shia and 20-30% are Sunni. However, there is no religious sectarianism between the two denominations among the Ahwazi, as the society is based more on tribal divisions than religious ones. There are also small numbers of Jews, Christians, and Mandaeans in Al-Ahwaz. Unemployment rates in Al-Ahwaz are very high due to the restriction on Ahwazi Arabic in the region.

Environment

Al-Ahwaz is famous in Iran for its natural beauty and its wealth of natural resources. Being situated in the mountainous regions north of the Ahwaz Ridge and the plains and marshlands of the south, the region has an abundance of rivers and rich deposits of oil and minerals. It is because of this that for centuries individuals have inhabited the area and the land is scattered with valuable archeological structures and artifacts. The Ahwazi Arabs have inhabited the area of Al-Ahwaz since 639 AD. However, the relatively recent oil mining, industrial and hydro-electric developments, coupled with the increased land confiscation by the Iranian government have spelled ecological and social disaster for the Ahwazi Arabs.

Oil mining and industrial development have radically transformed the Al-Ahwaz landscape as local mountains and river beds have been leveled in order to accommodate them. Local wildlife, such as the endangered Asiatic Cheetah and the Persian Fallow Deer, have had their populations severely reduced due to loss of habitat.

Fish populations as well have suffered as toxic runoff from the mines and factories pollute the local waterways. Recent research has shown high levels of mercury in the surrounding water supplies coming from the Bandar Imam Petrochemical complex. Local bird populations, especially the endangered falcons have shown extraordinary high levels of mercury in their bloodstreams. Signs of mercury poisoning are also evidenced in the indigenous Ahwazi Arab population in the form of birth defects, mental retardation, and a sharp rise in skin and respiratory diseases.

One the greatest threats to the Ahwazi people is the proposed diversion of the Karoun River by the Iranian government. The diversion project will hit the province’s Arab majority hard, exacerbating endemic poverty in the region by reducing water availability. The region also contains extensive marshes and rivers that support endangered spe-
cies of fish and migratory birds. In January 2006, local members of parliament threatened to resign their seats in protest at the diversion of the Karoun. They claimed that it would seriously undermine water security and the livelihoods of many farmers in the Arab-majority province. In December 2005, some Khuzestan MPs launched a petition to impeach Energy Minister Parviz Fatah over the project.

Nevertheless, in June 2007, Fatah rejected the United Nation Environment Program’s (UNEP) concerns over the environmental impact of the government’s diversion project, despite claims that it will create an environmental disaster. According to local media reports, Fatah said that the government would instead step up its river diversion program, claiming that it “will not damage any part of the country and will not reduce the quota of water of any province.” He said that Khuzestan would benefit from hydroelectric power stations that form part of the river diversion project.

According to the UNEP, the Hor al-Azeem marsh has transformed from one of the biggest marshes in the Middle East to a barren wasteland with soil that is too salty to sustain any plants. The marsh lies at the mouth of the Karkeh River on the Iran-Iraq border and also receives water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Iran's current project of transferring the waters of the Karoun River to decertified Iranian provinces will have major consequences for the marshland, according to environmental activists. Ahwazi Arabs in Khuzestan already suffer from poor health, low life expectancy, high rates of unemployment and pollution from the oil and petrochemical industries. The diversion of the Karoun would be a disaster for their livelihoods and well-being.

**RELEVANT LINKS**

The Democratic Solidarity Party of Al-Ahwaz
[http://www.alahwaz.info/site/?lang=ar](http://www.alahwaz.info/site/?lang=ar)

[http://www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

British Ahwazi Friendship Society

CIA World Factbook

Ahwaz Human Rights Organization
[www.ahwazhumanrights.org](http://www.ahwazhumanrights.org)

Medya News
"The living conditions of Iran's Arab population"

Photographs courtesy of Medya News.

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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is a democratic, international membership organization. Its Members are indigenous peoples, occupied nations, minorities and independent states or territories who have joined together to protect their human and cultural rights, preserve their environments, and to find non-violent solutions to conflicts, which affect them.

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