MEMBER PROFILE

AHWAZI ARABS

Democratic Solidarity Party of Ahwaz

Last updated: November 2017
**Status:** Indigenous Arab people, and ethnic, linguistic and cultural minority

**Population:** estimated to be between 5 and 7 million

**Capital:** Ahwaz

**Area:** Al-Ahwaz province, 89,000 km² in the south-west of Iran (although some Ahwazis reside outside of Al-Ahwaz)

**Language:** Arabic

**Religion:** Shi’a 70%, Sunni 24%, others including Jewish and Christians 1%

**Ethnic Groups:** Arab (75%), Persian, Lurs

**OVERVIEW**

The Ahwazi Arabs are one of the largest minority groups living in Iran and are predominantly settled in the Al-Ahwaz province. Al-Ahwaz, also known as Arabistan or Khuzestan, is situated in the south-western part of Iran. It borders the Basra province, Iraq in the west, the Gulf, the Shat al-Arab waterway and the mountains of Lurestan and Kurdistan in the north and east respectively.

Its capital is the city of Ahwaz. Nearly 85% 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, flows through Al-Ahwaz into the Gulf and constituted a major means of transportation through the region before the drying out the river as well as the excessive dam construction (around 89 dams were built in the area). The Al-Ahwaz province is one of the most lucrative provinces because of its natural resources and shipping ability. In spite of this wealth, Ahwazis living in Al-Ahwaz only benefit from a small part of the profits and many are forced to relocate due to the Iranian oil industry, large State-funded development projects and dam constructions.

Apart from not being compensated for the loss of their lands, the Ahwazi Arabs suffer constantly under widespread abuse and discrimination by the Iranian government. Since the 1980s the Iranian government has imposed several discriminatory ethnic and religious policies that have prevented Ahwazi Arabs from participating in government, limited their access to education and resources and also drove them into abject poverty. In order to silence opposition, Iranian authorities try to intimidate the Ahwazi Arabs by using all kinds of violence such as arbitrary arrests, torture, deportation and the destruction of property.

The United Nations (UN) institutions, the European Union (EU) and many State governments have condemned Iran’s repressive and discriminatory policies towards religious and ethnic minorities including Ahwazis on various occasions but the situation of Ahwazis remains worrying.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Arab Period

Before the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century, many Arab tribes have lived in different parts of Iran, each one retaining its own identity through language, culture and religion. According to Kasravi, in his book entitled 500 years history of Khuzestan and to Tabari, the Ahwazi-Arabs have lived in Khuzestan and other parts of southern Iran since the Parthian era, 4,000 years ago. In 639 AD, the Islamic conquest of Persia brought Islam to the area. The region of Al-Ahwaz changed hands from Arabs to Persians multiple times, but throughout history, the region maintained a majority of Arab population the region maintained a majority of Arab population. Muhammad Ibn Faalah Mashaasha independently ruled Al-Ahwaz from the 15th to the second half of the 19th century. At the time, the king of Iran, Nasser al-Din Shah, acknowledged the autonomy and independence of the region. It was from 1503 onwards that Al-Ahwaz started being known as Arabistan, signifying its Arab character as well as its Arab inhabitants. During this time Al-Ahwaz enjoyed considerable autonomy as it was 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 overthrown 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 started a heavy centralisation process, imposing Farsi as the official language and banning teaching Arabic in schools. This centralisation 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 bring Arabistan 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 that of 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 ascendance to power, the Islamic government responded severely and immediately cracked down on all federalist movements. Many ethnic minorities, including the Ahwazis, used this occasion to demand a better representation and more autonomy from the new government. Following to the systematic human rights infringements, on 30 May 1979, 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-standing border dispute, the Iranian government attempted to export its revolution by backing up the Iraqi Shiite opposition and the desire of Iraq to become the dominant Gulf State. The Iran-Iraq War began with Iraqi forces invading Al-Ahwaz. Ahwazis were subjected to the destruction of their homes, farms and lived under bombardments for eight years while non-local inhabitants of Khuzestan escaped from the ravaged region to their original homeland. Throughout the war, the UN Security Council worked for a ceasefire between two countries. Even though the ceasefire was agreed on paper in 1988, the last prisoners of war were only exchanged in 2003. It is estimated that over half a million Iraqi and Iranian soldiers, as well as civilians, have died in the war, although it is believed that much more were injured or wounded. At least 12,000 Ahwazi Arab conscripted soldiers from 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 since been labelled as terrorists and enemies to the Iranian state.

The 2005 Ahwazi Uprising

In 2005, a memorandum containing the signature of Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former chief of staff and Vice President for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs in the government of then-President Mohammad Khatami, was leaked. It included six articles regarding the demographic changes in the Al-Ahwaz region and the resettlement of Ahwazi Arabs from Al-Ahwaz to other regions in Iran in order to decrease the number of Ahwazis living in the area. This led to mass protests in the region from 15 April 2005, called by Ahwazi Arabs “Intifada Naisan”. The demonstrations lasted for 10 days and resulted in hundreds of arrests and 50 people killed by Iranian forces either on the street by direct shooting of the police or under torture in the detention centres. Later on, 40 people were also executed. The 2005 Ahwazi Uprising is considered as one of the most important benchmarks in the history of Ahwazi struggle.

The 2009 Iranian Elections

On 12 June 2009, Iran held its tenth presidential election in which the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was set against three challengers. The months preceding the election 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 a tense situation in the run-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. However, following the announcement of the results, public outrage erupted on the streets amongst widespread claims of voting fraud that the three defeated candidates alleged President Ahmadinejad had committed. 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 infrastructures. By the end of that week, Iran's Supreme Leader had ordered security forces to use violence and arbitrary arrests in order to suppress the opposition.

The protests were later referred to as the "Green movement". This movement mostly involved people living in the central part of Iran. Despite the overall majority of ethnic minorities not having participated in the demonstrations, it was still cracked down on by the Iranian military. Thus several 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 to this day. It is still unknown how many Ahwazi Arabs were arrested and detained as the Iranian government continues to censure this information. According to international and local human rights groups, including AHRO, at least 780 Ahwazi Arabs known as political organisers remain in prison from the 2009 elections.

According to Dr. Abadian, Executive Director of the AHRP, the "non-exclusive policy and the tendency of the leaders of the Green Movement where they did not win the hearts and minds of non-Persian minorities living in the outlying provinces, thus preventing it becoming a truly nationwide movement, was the reason for failure." Human right violations escalated and the official media cooperated with the Iranian government in publishing confessions of Ahwazi Arab detainees in 2006 and again in 2012, even before courts were held as was the case for Sajjad Beit Abdullah and Ahmad Dabat. Their families claim that their trumped up confession in the media caused their death under torture.

2014 under President Hassan Rohani

In January 2014, Amnesty International urged the Iranian government to end human rights violations against Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority and stated the following: "President Rouhani’s first official visit to Khuzestan province must signal a clear policy shift in Iran’s treatment of ethnic and religious minorities rather than be a mere measure of appeasement while human rights violations against the Ahwazi Arabs and other minorities in Iran continue unabated, warned Amnesty International." Yet, the government took another path and dealt with the Ahwazi question by organising the “Comprehensive Security Project of Khuzestan”. Instead of working in light of their international and constitutional obligations after the mass protests of 2005, Iranian authorities became increasingly suspicious of Ahwazi Arabs and organised a comprehensive plan for the "containment" of the Ahwazis’ demands. The 45-page document was approved during a meeting of a high-ranked committee tasked by the Supreme Council for National Security to implement the project. The meeting was chaired by Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, the Iranian Interior Minister in Hassan Rouhani’s government. According to the document, the high committee is aimed at supervising the implementation of the security project and it supposed to set up five committees to implement the initiative in the province within a five-year period, from 2014 to 2019.

These committees should implement security instructions and recommendations in order to eliminate threats and confront challenges in dealing with Arab activists and their civil movements. Every six months, these committees present a report of their activities to the General Secretary of the Supreme Council for the National Security of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, the senior supervisor on the implementation of this project. The document divided the challenges in controlling Arabs into five categories: political, cultural, social, economic and security-related.
The 2017 Elections

Ahwazi parties, along with Kurdish, Balochi and Azeri ones in exile, called for the boycott of the elections. As during the 2009 elections, Tehran intensified its crackdown on Ahwazi activists before the Presidential and municipal elections held in May 2017. Many people were subjected to arbitrary arrests and torture.

CURRENT ISSUES

Economy and Living Conditions

Even though the Khuzestan province is one of the richest region in Iran concerning natural resources, it is clear that there is a significant disproportion of wealth and social inequality between the Arabs and ethnic majority Persians. Ahwazi-Arab region produces up to 85% of oil and gas of Iran, however they live in abject poverty. There are at least 81 petrochemicals, steel industries, agro-industrial complexes in the region.

The discriminatory policies towards the minorities and Indigenous groups as well as Persianisation through legal means in the Khuzestan province leads to high unemployment rate in the region. For instance, Ahwazi Arabs are deprived from working in the public and private sectors in the region by the law called "Gozinesh". Thus, this renders the employment rate in the Khuzestan province is relatively higher than the rate at the national level (10.8%). Around 50 per cent of Arab women and young people are unemployed while in rural areas, the total unemployment rate is even higher with 20%. In spite of the province's fertile lands, farms are suffering from lack of investment, which leads to many farmers unemployed (UNPO, 2013).

Furthermore, Khuzestan province is uppermost among the 31 provinces of Iran in terms of receiving immigrants from other provinces. Hence, over the 70% of employees in the region are non-locals. As part of the Persianisation, Ahwazi workers face sack by the companies in the region. They are in danger of losing their jobs if they participate in a peaceful protest or any activities for their rights and democracy even claim for their pending wages for months. As reported by Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation, in 2016, around 50 skilled and semi-skilled Ahwazi workers in the largest refinery in Abadan were fired by their employer and in turn their places were filled with non-Arabs incomers who are overwhelmingly unskilled workers (AHRO 2016). According to the representative of the city of Abadan, among 4,000 workers in the petrochemical companies, 76% of them are non-Arabs.

According to a research, less than 0.05% of managerial positions in Khuzestan province including public and the private sectors are occupied by Ahwazis (AHRO 2017). Only 5
percent of governmental posts in the area are held by Arabs whereas the Khuzestan province has not had an Arab governor since 1925. Consequently, all these conditions drive Ahwazis to work as an unskilled labour such as street hawkers. In theory, the discrimination towards Ahwazis goes against the Iranian constitution—at least on paper-states that Iranians should be treated equally despite their ethnicity or religion.

**Resource Exploitation and Environmental Degradation**

Besides being plagued with severe socio-economic deprivation, the indigenous Arab residents of Khuzestan suffer from one of the highest rates of poverty in Iran, as well as a high level of water and air pollution. The oil facilities surround and suffocate the city by releasing toxic materials and pollutants in the air. Since the annexation of Al-Ahwaz by Shah of Iran Reza Khan in 1925, Tehran has turned the fertile lands of the Ahwazi Arabs into a desert due to the oil extraction and sugar cane production in the region. Accordingly, in 2016, Al-Ahwaz was ranked the most polluted city in the world by the World Health Organization (WHO). It is ironic that Ahwaz residents face such difficulties since they live in one of the most oil-rich cities of the Islamic republic. Hence, local residents held mass protests on February 2017, asking for the resignation of the local governor and for action to be taken against both the environmental challenges that the region is currently facing and the high unemployment rate in the region (New York Times – NYT, 2017). However, the officials, instead of listening to their fair demands regarding drastic pollution in the Al Ahwaz region, ignored the claims as Iranian security forces declared demonstrations illegal. Moreover, the Iranian media’s response has remained dismissive of the country’s environmental problems.

Roughly 40% of the gas extracted alongside oil in the province, which could be used as an energy resource, is actually burned off, causing the emission of millions of tons of carbon dioxide gas in the air every year and further worsening of the already-existing sand and dust pollution, in an area suffering from desertification. Not only the oil extraction but also the waste after the refinery process poured into the rivers, marshlands and farm land in Al-Ahwaz, led to the pollution of the environment.

Moreover, as a result of the massive pollution, 400,000-hectare Hur-Alazim wetland in the north-west of Ahwaz, Iran’s biggest wetland and marshes that were used for fishing, wildlife conservation and helped reduce dust pollution in the region, dried up. This has forced tens of thousands of Ahwazi indigenous marsh Arabs to abandon their lands, which ensured their
livelihoods through farming and fishing, causing widespread poverty and the forced migration of farmers from villages to the slums in the outskirts of Ahwaz and bigger cities.

Consequently, large sandstorms now regularly occur, disrupting people's lives and causing a major increase in cases of lung infections and cancer. Mercury poisoning also causes birth defects, mental retardation and a sharp rise in skin and respiratory diseases. According to the Iranian Ministry of Health, every year, about 80,000 people in Iran die due to environmental pollution, which amounts to 21% of overall annual deaths in Iran.

The severe pollution badly affects not only humans but also animals. Oil mining and industrial development have radically transformed the Al-Ahwaz landscape and river beds were levelled in order to create space for these projects. The number of local wild animals such as the endangered Asiatic cheetah and the Persian fallow deer have sharply decreased since they lost their habitat. The fish population also has declined as toxic runoff from the mines and factories polluted the local waterways. Research show high levels of mercury in the surrounding water supplies coming from the Bandar Imam Petrochemical complex. Local bird populations, especially the endangered falcons, have extraordinarily high levels of mercury in their bloodstream.

**Structural Discrimination Towards Ahwazis**

Like the other human rights activists in Iran, those who campaign for Ahwazis face constant oppression from the government. They endure serious human rights violations including arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, during which torture and ill-treatment are routine. Trials without access to legal representation are also common. Moreover, due to their ethnicity, some are falsely labelled as separatists by the central government which remains suspicious towards Ahwazi Arabs ever since the Iran-Iraq war, despite the fact that thousands of Ahwazis lost their lives fighting beside the Iranian army. Tehran still treats them as being disloyal and infiltrated by foreign countries who try to destabilise Iran. In this sense, Ahwazis’ demands for basic fundamental rights including education in mother tongue and social and economic justice, have often been labelled as secessionists and totally ignored by the authorities albeit the multi-ethnic character of Iran and the repeated Ahwazi demands to respect the territorial integrity of the country.
Since mass protests erupted in Al-Ahwaz in 2005, there have been numerous cases of Ahwazi activists being imprisoned on the grounds of unjust accusations, and charged for “moharebeh”, “being enemies of God”. They are generally denied legal representation and in some cases, Iranian justice procedures. In many cases, the prisoners have been executed without any prior notification, contrary to the law stating that a prisoner and his legal counsel are entitled to 48-hour notification and further objection before execution.

In practice, Ahwazi Arabs are not allowed to run their own local affairs and their traditional territory that is run as an occupied land by the general governor of Khuzestan and all other political, military and security commanders, officers, mayors of the province and high and mid-level government officials of Khuzestan who have consistently been selected from non-Arabs. This, in turn, exacerbates discrimination, exclusion and ethnic tensions.

Enforces Disappearances

Despite his campaign promises, President Hassan Rouhani has not met Iran’s obligations to respect human rights. On the contrary, under his term, the ongoing marginalisation of ethnic minorities has been deemed paramount by the Iranian regime. Central to Tehran’s strategy to silence the voices of human rights activists, over the past years, Iran’s judicial and security bodies have waged a vicious crackdown against ethnic minorities by conducting enforced disappearances. In this regard, arrests and executions of Ahwaz human and cultural rights activists have increased by at least 20% during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani. Enforced disappearances are used as an attempt to put victims outside of the protection of the rule of law.

Since 2004, the Iranian government has been delaying several requests from the UN Working Group on Involuntary and Enforced Disappearances to visit Iran. The UN has received 522 cases related to enforced disappearances, however, the real figure is believed to be much higher.

The case of Yousef Silavi, forcibly disappeared since 2009, is one of many examples that demonstrate the shameful human rights violations perpetrated by the Iranian government. Additionally, Iranian authorities destroyed the mass graves of political prisoners who had been executed in the 1980s in Ahwaz, and therefore, deny the fundamental right of the
victims’ families to grieve with dignity and to claim justice for their missing relatives, as the evidence of deaths is erased. In some cases, Iranian authorities’ ruthless determination to dismiss victims’ existence results in the silencing and imprisonment of family members trying to uncover the truth.

**Land Grabbing and Displacement**

During the Iran-Iraq war, the central government confiscated some lands belonging to Ahwazis in the Khuzestan region 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 to get back their lands. Some lands were built on, but only for military purposes.

According to a UN report issued in 2005 by the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing after his visit to the Khuzestan province, between 200,000 and 250,000 Arabs have been and continue to be forced to leave their traditional lands in the Khuzestan region due to development projects focussing, for example, on sugar cane, carried out by the central government. The rapporteur specified that those projects were set up without the consent of the local Ahwazis, yet there was no adequate resettlement or compensation. Furthermore, the affected population had no access to legal remedies in order to challenge the legitimacy and legality of this act. They only had the right to a compensation, in general considerably lower than the average market price.

As part of the Persianisation of the region, in the last 15 years, the Iranian government has confiscated more than 250,000 hectares from indigenous farmers to resettle other ethnic groups (mostly Persians) emigrating from other cities in Iran. In 2008, the Governmental committee on Economy granted more than 7,520 hectares of land owned by Ahwazis to the Ministry of Energy for drilling and oil extraction in the area of Dasht Azadgan (al-Khafjiya), in cooperation with Chinese and Japanese companies (Housing and Land Rights Network, 2015). As a recent example of land grabbing occurring in the Khuzestan province, in 2017, the central government launched a campaign the plant trees in high-risk areas on 4,000 hectares of uncultivated land, as part of the “Fighting Sandstorms” project. The area was specifically chosen because most lands belonged to Arab farmers, who had not been able to cultivate their lands due to drought in the area.

**Cultural, Educational and Linguistic Rights**

Ahwazi Arabs suffer under the aggressive Persian nationalism imposed by the official and semi-official authorities in the Iranian educational curriculum and media by propagating the so-called “Iranian nationality” (Persian), thus excluding Arabs and all other nationalities. The banning of non-Persian languages implies a ban on non-Persian literature and cultures, thus inducing and creating unequal citizenry. Tehran denies the rich character of a multinational, multilingual and multicultural Iran by means of Persianisation policies. Therefore, Ahwazi Arabs and other non-Persian speaking nationalities are deprived of their rights to study in their mother tongues.

Only Armenian schools in Iran are allowed to teach in a non-Farsi language. Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution guarantees that minorities have the right to use their mother tongues, yet none of the Iranian government since 1979 have put this article in practice. Consequently, a number of activists from different minorities were arrested and accused of being secessionists in the past decades.

Ever since Reza Shah’s centralisation 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 have to drop out of school because they are forced to learn Farsi and access to positions in public administration is limited for native Arab speakers from Al-Ahwaz. In its second review of the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted
in May 2013, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) expressed its concern over the high dropout rates of Arab children and high illiteracy rates among Ahwazi Arabs (CESCR, 2013).

Clearly, the monolingual education system has had a crucial impact on the high rate of illiteracy among Arabs and other minorities. Similarly, the lack of investment in education in the districts of Ahwaz and the Department of Education’s ban on the employment of independent teachers worsen the unfortunate situation (AHRO, 2017). Besides, the Islamic Republic continues to change the names of cities, towns, provinces, rivers and geographical locations from the local Arab indigenous names to Persian ones, in compliance with a larger campaign of cultural repression by the suppression of Ahwazi-Arab ethnicity and culture. Amnesty International, in its annual world report, has highlighted the repression of the expressions of Arabic culture, including attires and poetry, by Iranian authorities (Amnesty International, 2017).

CULTURE

The people of Al-Ahwaz historically speak a dialect of Arabic identical to the one spoken in Iraq. 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 Ahwazis, as society is based more on tribal divisions than religious ones. There is also a small number of Jews, Christians and Mandaean in Al-Ahwaz. The Ahwazi community lost its diversity since most religious minorities left the region due to the Tehran's persecution of religious minorities within ethnic ones. As an example, from 30,000 in today the number of Mandaean has been reduced to only 7,000 in Iran since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Ahwazi cultural activists are allowed to organise events only if it is in line with the Iranian general sectarian policies and in support of governmental strategies. Accordingly, any independent activity would be suppressed.
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