Human Rights and the Ahwazi Arabs

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the Ahwazis?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppression from Tehran</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary situation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land rights</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives for land confiscation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land confiscation in practice</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation walls</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arvand Free Zone</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poverty</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women’s rights</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honour killings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political freedoms and human rights</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional rights</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political freedoms</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The justice system</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death penalty</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water security</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial pollution</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear energy</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ahwazi refugees</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International response</strong></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix 1: Abtahi letter</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix 2: Arvand Free Zone</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix 3: Land confiscation</strong></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix 4: Human rights reports</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnesty International</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRIN</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other organisations</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive summary

Overview
Residing mainly in the south-west of Iran, the Ahwazi Arabs are one of the Middle East’s most disadvantaged and persecuted ethnic groups. The overwhelming majority of the Ahwazi Arabs live in Iran’s Khuzestan province (accounting for some 67% of the province’s population), which occupies a geo-strategically crucial position. Not only is it the gateway between the Arab world and Asia, but it also accounts for up to 90% of Iran’s oil resources. This ‘accident of natural geography’, far from being to the benefit of the local population, though, has been the source of much hardship. Whilst Khuzestan’s oil forms the backbone of the Iranian economy, its people have been viewed, at best, as an inconvenience, or, at worst, a threat, by the Iranian government. In order to eradicate their threat to the Iranian establishment, Ahwazi Arabs are subjected to a mixture of Persianisation, forced migration, violent political repression and economic exclusion.

Land rights
Persianisation has involved the confiscation of Arab land and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Ahwazi Arabs. The Persianisation programme involves the confiscation of Arab-owned land and “ethnic restructuring”, which typically involves the forced migration of Arabs out of Khuzestan and their replacement with “loyal” ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Persians. Some Ahwazis are relocated to other parts of Iran, while many are forced from their farms into city slums. However, slums have also been the target of land confiscation, with the regime attacking and destroying Ahwazi homes. Slums are also being turned into ghettoes, with separation walls to segregate indigenous Arabs from non-indigenous and privileged migrants.

Poverty
Although Khuzestan is the most resource-rich province in Iran, the indigenous Ahwazi Arab population suffers from some of the country’s highest levels of unemployment, health problems, child malnutrition and other poverty indicators. Poverty is intimately bound up with ethnic discrimination. In urban areas, Ahwazi Arabs live in shanty towns which resemble the townships of apartheid South Africa. Official statistics tend to underplay the real extent of unemployment, with joblessness rising to well over 50% among Ahwazi Arab youth and women. Statistics show that 1.46 million live in the countryside, where official unemployment reaches 20%, although problems of under-employment mean the actual rate is likely to be far higher. Despite the province’s fertility and potential in agriculture, farms are suffering from a lack of investment and are under-performing, leading to rural poverty. In most Arab villages there are no schools. While the illiteracy rate in Iran is about 10%-18%, it is over 50% among Arab men in Khuzestan and even higher for Ahwazi women. Ahwazi students drop out of schools at a rate of 30% at elementary level, 50% at secondary and 70% at high school because they are forced to study the “official language”, Farsi, a language which is not theirs. The learning of Arabic is confined to religion and is commonly classical Arabic rather than the local dialect. Consequently, Ahwazi Arabs are often semi-literate in their native language, but struggle with learning in a language that is foreign to them.

Women’s rights
Ahwazi Arab women share the problems of patriarchy and gender oppression with other Iranian citizens. But they also suffer from ethnic discrimination and racism, making them the most disadvantaged group in Iranian society. Due to discrimination in education, almost all Ahwazi women living in rural areas are illiterate. Honour killing of Ahwazi
women is common, particularly in rural areas, and many suffer from serious gynaecological and other health problems due to lack of access to healthcare facilities. Ahwazi women’s rights activists lay the blame on the Iranian government for ethnic discrimination, which has led to backward attitudes towards divorce and women’s health. The situation is made worse by the provincial government’s refusal to appoint an Ahwazi to the role of women’s officer. Women lack political agency due to the ethnic and gender discrimination in education and employment and are often confined to the home.

**Political freedoms and human rights**

Although all Iranian citizens suffer political repression and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, state violence against Ahwazi Arabs is more extreme than against residents in the capital Any form of Arab political mobilization – even the wearing of the traditional Arabic keffiyeh (scarf) in displays of Arabic culture – has been crushed, with the government executing anyone suspected of engaging in minority rights activism. Ahwazi Arab minority rights activists are portrayed by the Iranian government as representing all that it regards as “evil”. The government and its supporters routinely denounce Ahwazi rights activists as Satanic, Wahhabi (Sunní extremists), Ba’athist or agents working on behalf of the Israeli, British, US or Saudi governments. Although Ahwazi activists campaign against social, cultural, economic and political exclusion, the government insists they have a religious agenda that is antithetical to the theocratic establishment, the “source of truth.” Consequently, Ahwazi dissidents are often put on trial for “enmity with God”, which is punishable by death.

**Environment**

A large proportion of the Ahwazi Arab population depends on farming and fishing for its livelihood. However, they are paying the price for industrial projects that pollute the environment and are operated by companies that discriminate against Arabs. The Iranian government is also carrying out a river diversion project that is seeing local waters redirected to dry areas of Iran, such as the ethnically Persian provinces of Yazd and Rafsanjan. Of particular concern is the Karoon River, which is an essential water source for agriculture as well as fishing and provides the largest source of income for indigenous Ahwazi Arabs. High levels of industrial pollutants and a river diversion project threaten major ecological disaster, leading to further impoverishment of indigenous Arabs. Disruptions to water supplies force many Ahwazis to rely on contaminated water from the Karoon, which contains high levels of human sewage and industrial pollutants. Meanwhile, fishermen are reporting outbreaks of disease in fish and a sharp decline in fish numbers, indicating that Iran’s mismanagement of water resources has devastated river and marine life.

**Refugees**

Ahwazi refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have faced persecution and discrimination outside Iran. Ahwazis found sanctuary in Iraq and Syria at times when Iran’s relations with these countries were poor, during the 1980s. However, following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iran’s Iraqi allies were quick to evict Ahwazis from their homes. Meanwhile, Syria, under pressure from Iran, arrested a number of Ahwazi refugees and deported some back to Iran, where were arrested on arrival and tortured. Ahwazi refugees also report harassment by Iranian agents in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

**International response**

The British government, the House of Commons, the European Commission and the European Parliament have condemned ethnic discrimination against Ahwazi Arabs and other national groups. However, they have concentrated their attention on individual
cases of human rights abuse against Ahwazi Arabs, particularly the use of the death penalty, rather than broader issue of ethnic persecution. British government ministers have voiced concern that any proactive stance could cause more problems than it would solve as it would confirm Iranian propaganda that claims the British government is funding, training and arming separatist organizations. Neither the UK nor the EU have endorsed the Ahwazi Arabs’ right to self-determination or the Mohammerah Declaration of 1979, which embodies the aspirations of Ahwazi Arabs. Unless a political solution can be found to address ethnic grievances in Iran, Ahwazis will continue to be persecuted and marginalized, even in the event of regime change.
Introduction

Who are the Ahwazis?
Residing mainly in the south-west of Iran, the Ahwazi Arabs are one of the Middle East’s most disadvantaged and persecuted ethnic groups. Their precise number is difficult to ascertain. A figure of around two to three million Ahwazis is commonly cited, based on the CIA claim that 3% of the Iranian population is Arab. This figure, however, rests on census figures from the 1950s – the last time the country’s ethnic composition was analysed. The true figure is, therefore, likely to be much higher than that, probably closed to 4.5 million – a figure equal to around 7% of Iran’s total population.1

The overwhelming majority of the Ahwazi Arabs live in Iran’s Khuzestan province (accounting for some 67% of the province’s population), which occupies a geo-strategically crucial position. Not only is it the gateway between the Arab world and Asia, but it also accounts for up to 90% of Iran’s oil resources. This ‘accident of natural geography’, far from being to the benefit of the local population, though, has been the source of much hardship.

Whilst Khuzestan’s oil forms the backbone of the Iranian economy, its people have been viewed, at best, as an inconvenience, or, at worst, a threat, by the Iranian government. Oil revenues from the province are largely spent elsewhere – to the extent that the Iranian government has consistently refused to allocate just 1.5% of oil revenues to Khuzestan, (as requested by the province’s representatives in the Majlis (parliament)).2

Oppression from Tehran
Recent history
For much of its history, Persia was a multi-national empire ruled by the Shahanshah or “King of Kings”, indicating the devolved nature of power in the empire. The devolution of power goes as far back as the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE), when Darius the Great established satrapies, with governors required only to pay tribute to the emperor. The Arab regions in the Persian empire enjoyed considerable autonomy as they were largely cut off from the seat of imperial power by the Zagros mountain chain. Local Arab sheikhs enjoyed virtual independence from Tehran and the region became known as Arabistan (meaning “land of the Arabs” in Farsi). The distinctiveness of Arabistan was

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noted by the British colonial administrator Sir Arnold Wilson, who wrote in his memoirs that Arabistan was “a country as different from Persia as is Spain from Germany.”

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Muhaisin clan came to prominence, led by Sheikh Jabir al-Kaabi, who sought to strengthen and unify the dominant Bani Kaab tribe under the Sheikdom of Mohammerah. His son Sheikh Khazaal came to power in 1897 and co-operated with the British in the areas of trade, security and investment. His ability to broker agreements without the prior authorisation of Tehran was a testament to the virtual independence of Arabistan. Under Khazaal, Arabistan became an important trade route for the British Empire and became one of the first oil-producing regions in the Middle East, with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (the forerunner of British Petroleum) building the world’s largest refinery in the Arab city of Abadan.

The overthrow of Persia’s Qajar Dynasty and the rise to power of Reza Pahlavi in 1925 brought a new era of centralised power, with the new ruler defining the country in terms of a Persian identity. The Pahlavi dynasty’s ethnic chauvinism was a major break with the devolved and multi-national character of the Persian empire. Reza Pahlavi deposed Sheikh Khazal in 1925, ended Arab autonomy and in 1935 changed the name of the region to Khuzestan; at the same time, Persia’s name was changed to Iran, “land of the Aryans”. The Persians were declared to be of pure Aryan blood, with the Semitic Arabs regarded as members of an inferior race. Non-Persians were forcibly assimilated through ethnocide, linguicide and genocide.

The fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in February 1979 led to an upsurge in demands by non-Persian nationalities for autonomy. Kurds, Turkmens, Balochis and Ahwazi Arabs issued similar demands for social, cultural, linguistic and economic rights, with a federal government responsible for foreign policy and control over defence, finance and the economy at a national level.

The 1979 Ahwazi Arab uprising led to the biggest massacre in modern Iranian history, with 817 unarmed Ahwazi Arabs slaughtered in the streets of Mohammerah (renamed Khorramshahr) by Ayatollah Khomeini’s Revolutionary Guards. Most died during one single day of carnage, which has become known as Black Wednesday. During the massacre, General Madani imposed a brutal clamp-down on Arabs in Mohammerah in May 1979 which Ahwazi Arabs regard as a crime against humanity. At the time, Arabs were demonstrating for cultural rights and were supported by Ayatollah Mohammed Taher al-Khaqani, an Ahwazi Shi’ite mullah. Following the massacre, al-Khaqani was put under house arrest in Qom, where he died. His son Sheikh Mohammed Kazem al-Khaqani continues to campaign for secularism, religious tolerance and human rights. In March 2007, Sheikh al-Khaqani addressed a meeting at the House of Commons in London organised by the Henry Jackson Society, in which he outlined his opposition to theocracy and his insistence that mullahs must stay out of politics.

The following is the declaration submitted by the Ahwazi Arab delegates to the Interim government on April 1979 which was published in Iranian newspapers. It remains the basis for Ahwazi Arab resistance. The appeal centred on demands for regional autonomy and cultural identity, while demanding equal rights in a modern economy:

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3 Sir Arnold Wilson, *Southwest Persia: A Political Officer’s Diary, 1907-1914*, p 93, OUP, 1941
Mohammerah Declaration

In the name of God, the most Compassionate, Most Merciful

April 1979

Mr. Mehdi Bazargan, the respected Interim Premier of Iran,

The Muslim Arab people’s delegates appeal to your ministry to listen to the demands of a consensus among Arab people, in cities and rural areas, that has emerged through demonstrations. These demands have been supported by Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammed Taher al Shobair Khaqani. The demands include the legitimate rights of the Arab people and their right to self-government, within the framework of the Islamic Republic, and maintaining the unity of Iranian territory.

Mr. President,

The delegates assure you that matters relating to foreign policy, the army, defence of the country’s borders, currency, international agreements and long-term economic policies are under the jurisdiction of the central state, and our people condemn all conspiracies designed to fragment the unity of Iran. We condemn imperialism, racism, reactionary ideologies and defend a political Non-Aligned Movement, and reject all colonial agreements, which are harmful to Iran national independence.

Our people believe in the autonomy of “Khuzestan”, which was historically called Arabistan and geographically belongs to the Arab people.

The basic demands of the Arab people are as follows:

1. Recognition of the Arab people as a distinct ethnic group and enshrine this in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2. Establish a local parliament in the autonomous area with powers to legislate and enforce laws and ensure the participation of the Arab people in the Iranian Constituent Assembly, the National Council and the cabinet on the basis of their proportion of the total population.

3. Establishing an Arab-led judiciary in Arab areas, conforming with the laws of the Islamic Republic.

4. Arabic language should become the official language in the autonomous region, while the Persian language should remain the official language for all Iran.

5. The Arabic language should be taught in primary schools, while education in the Persian language will be conducted in the autonomous area.

6. An Arabic language university along with Arabic language schools and educational institutions should be established in the autonomous regime in order to enhance the role of the Arab people, with support given to young Arab people to study abroad.

7. Freedom of expression and publication should be emphasised with the independent publication of Arabic language books and newspapers and independent broadcasting on radio and television networks, without any kind of censorship.
8. Priority should be given to employment for Arabs in the autonomous area in public and private sectors.

9. Oil revenues should be used to develop the Arab region's industry and agriculture.

10. The names of cities, villages and districts should revert to their original Arabic names, which the fascist Pahlavi regime had changed to Persian.

11. Arabs should be able to participate in the army and local security forces, operating under the autonomous government, with the possibility of promotion to high military ranks, which had been denied under the Pahlavi regime.

12. A review of the agrarian reform law, with land redistributed to peasants, based on the laws of the Islamic Republic which say that “the earth is for people who cultivate it.”

Finally, we ask the government of Mehdi Bazargan to refrain from negotiations with the opportunist and reactionary elements on resolving issues related to the Arab people.

Signed,

Delegates of the Muslim Arab people of Iran.

Contemporary situation

Khuzestan, lacking in central government welfare support, continues to bear the scars of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. That war was, in part, brought about by Saddam Hussein’s attempts to exploit the legitimate grievances of the Ahwazis for his own ends. Believing that, as Arabs, the Ahwazis would side with him, Saddam initiated the war by sending his army across the Iran-Iraq border in an attempt to annex Khuzestan. As it was, at least 12,000 Ahwazis died fighting against Saddam’s invading force. ⁶

Despite this demonstration of their commitment to Iran’s territorial integrity, the Ahwazis have continued to be viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility, by Tehran. Consequently, they have faced a sustained programme of land confiscation and ‘ethnic restructuring’ from a government determined to secure access to energy resources at all costs. This has entailed a concerted effort at ‘Persianisation’, with the government of Tehran attempting to force the supposedly ‘treacherous’ Arabs out of Khuzestan, to be replaced by ‘loyal’ ethnic groups. Since the 1979 revolution, it is estimated that over 200,000 hectares of land have been forcibly taken, or ‘legally’ stolen, by the government. (By way of comparison, in almost 40 years of occupation of the West Bank, the Israelis are estimated to have confiscated some 394,000 hectares of Palestinian land. ⁷) In addition to sustained land confiscation, the Ahwazis have faced not only social and economic discrimination (enduring hardship, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment at higher rates than the national average), but also a prolonged ‘kulturkampf’, waged against them by the Iranian regime.

⁶ Ibid
⁷ Amnesty International estimates that some 70% of West Bank land has been confiscated by Israel (see foot-note 45, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Under the rubble: House demolition and destruction of land and property, available at http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde150332004) The figure of 394,000 is, thus derived by applying this to the total amount of land within the West Bank (5,640km²) as given by the CIA World Fact Book, available at http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/we.html
**Land rights**

Persianisation has involved the confiscation of Arab land and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Ahwazi Arabs. This typically involves the forced migration of Arabs out of Khuzestan and their replacement with “loyal” ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Persians. Some Ahwazis are relocated to other parts of Iran, while many are forced from their farms into city slums. However, slums have also been the target of land confiscation, with the regime attacking and destroying Ahwazi homes. Slums are also being turned into ghettos, with separation walls to segregate indigenous Arabs from non-indigenous and privileged migrants. Land confiscation and forced migration are in line with the “ethnic restructuring” programme outlined in a top secret letters written by Sayed Mohammad-Ali Abtahi when he served as Iran's Vice-President (see Appendix 1) and Brigadier General Gholamali Rasheed (see Appendix 2). The Abtahi letter was leaked to the international media in 2005, prompting the April intifada in Ahwaz in which over 100 Ahwazis were killed by security forces.

**Motives for land confiscation**

1. **Economy:** Khuzestan is a major national source of oil, food and agro-industrial crops. There is a need to bring land in Khuzestan under government control as part of its centrally-directed planned economic policies.

2. **Security:** Khuzestan is militarily important as it was the front-line in the Iran-Iraq War and hosts the elite Qods brigade of the Revolutionary Guard. The government is wary of having any large Arab population in this border province, believing that they are inherently disloyal and secessionist. In an effort to impose population control, Arab-owned land is given to state-owned industries and “loyal” citizens of non-Arab origin, in particular people associated with the armed forces.

3. **Culture:** There is an underlying racial prejudice against Ahwazi Arabs, who are considered culturally backward by the ethnic Persian elite—a situation that is not helped by their lack of access to education. The prevailing attitude is that Ahwazis cannot be trusted and Tehran is better able to manage Khuzestan’s valuable natural resources.

**Land confiscation in practice**

The regime is encouraging ethnic Persians to settle on the land confiscated from Ahwazi Arab farmers by placing advertisements in Farsi-speaking provinces and cities. The adverts promise cheap fully furnished apartments with all amenities, which is in stark contrast to the squalor of the slums and villages where most Ahwazi Arabs reside.

Government sources have confirmed that thousands of hectares of Arab lands have been transferred to government companies and other agencies.

- More than 200,000 hectares of land owned by Ahwazi Arab farmers has been confiscated since the 1979 Revolution and given to the government sponsored “Sugar Cane Project”, an intensive sugar cultivation project. The government has provided economic incentives and enticements - such as zero-interest loans which are not available to Arabs to re-settle non-Arab people onto expropriated Arab farmlands.
Around 47,000 hectares of Ahwazi Arab farmland in the Jofir area has been transferred to “Isargaran” non-indigenous Persian settlers, government trusted agents and the families of members of the security forces.

A further 25,000 hectares has been taken from Ahwazi Arab farmers and given to the government-owned “Shilat” corporation and government agencies.

More than 6,000 hectares of Ahwazi farmland north of Shush has been taken to “resettle the faithful non-indigenous Persians”, according to directives by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Revolutionary Corp Command. These policies have forced Ahwazi Arabs into poor shanty towns, such as Lashkar-Abad, Raffish-Abad, Gavmish-Abad, Kut Abdullah, Haseer-Abad, Zowieh, Zergan, Daghaghla, Seyeed Khalaf, Mallashieh, Shileng-Abad in Ahwaz City, the sixth biggest city of Iran.

The homes of 4,000 Arab residents of Sapidar, many of whom fought for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, were destroyed and bulldozed over in 2003.

More than 15,000 Arab farmers, who have been made landless by the government’s land confiscation programme, have been forced to resettle in a camp named “Bhehsheiti” outside city of Mashahd in the north eastern Iranian province of Khorassan.

In September 2004, the Iranian regime began a large housing project in Khuzestan to resettle ethnic Persians to Khuzestan, while continuing to force ethnic Arabs to migrate to other provinces. Some completed settlements include the Ramin-2 townships 45 km south of Ahwaz built to resettle 500,000 non-Arabs and the Shirinshahr settlement north of Ahwaz to settle 50,000 ethnic Persians from central provinces. Similar resettlement projects are underway in predominantly Arab cities, towns and villages such as Mahshar, Khorramshar, Abadan, Hamiodieh and Sosangard Mula-Sani.

In early 2006, the Iranian government issued an announcement that outlined further expansion of the Ramin settlement, which involved further confiscations of Ahwazi Arab lands. The announcement stated:

The new company that oversees the new city of Ramin (outside Ahwaz) in accordance with the article 2 of the below law and other laws pertaining to purchase and confiscation of lands for building cities and other military and civilian developments, law # 1358/11/117, issued and approved by the respected revolutionary council, is planning to expand the first phase of the New city of Ramin, and needs take over and possess parts of area of Sanicheh and Jalieh, plaque # 29 and 42 of zone 5 of Ahwaz, in accordance with the attached layout [pictured].

Therefore, this announcement will be published only twice in one month, for informing the owners of said properties, who must repond within 15 days from the publication of this announcement, with their ownership documents, to this location, for their submittal...
(relinquishment) of their properties to us. Attend the office of this company located in Kianpars corner of Sixth Street West, 2nd floor.

If owners do not visit the office, the expropriation and confiscation will continue to take place according to the law.

**Separation walls**

Separation walls in Ahwaz such as the one pictured are designed to segregate the indigenous Arab population from wealthier non-Arab districts built on land confiscated from Arabs.  

Ethnic segregation and land confiscation have led to a series of peaceful demonstrations by Ahwazi Arabs, angry that they are being socially and economically excluded from development. The photograph on the right shows a demonstration held in April 2006 near a separation wall in the Hay al-Thawra district in Ahwaz City.

**Arvand Free Zone**

Land acquisition and ethnic cleansing are intimately bound up with militarisation. The need to ensure security and control over the province has led to an aggressive form of Persianisation that has entailed the forced migration of indigenous Arabs from the province, the destruction of their homes, confiscation of their land and the suppression and elimination of all signs of Arab identity.

The creation of the military-industrial Arvand Free Zone (AFZ) from 2005 has involved the mass expulsion of Arabs and the destruction of their villages. In all, up to 500,000 Ahwazi Arabs could be displaced by the creation of a 5,000 square km security zone along the Shatt Al-Arab, which includes the AFZ (see Appendix 2). The expulsion campaign began with the Arab farmers located on Minoo Island, near Abadan. The islanders were bullied by AFZ officials into giving up their land before the official deadline, indicating an increasing sense of urgency associated with establishing the zone.

The zone stretches 30km from Abadan along the Shatt Al-Arab to the land border between Basra and Khuzestan. The zone is in three segments: an island and adjacent land measuring 30 sq km, a strip of land north of Khorramshahr measuring 25 sq km and an in-land eastern segment measuring around 100 sq km in area. The total land area of the AFZ is around 155 sq km and includes Arab towns and villages.

In 2006, the *Hamsayeha* newspaper, which covered Khuzestan, reported that the AFZ could be “physically separated” from Iran. Nasser Kermani, director of Iran's custom
service, told the newspaper that the AFZ should be separated from the cities of Abadan and Muhammarah (Khorammshahr) and adjacent areas along the Shatt Al-Arab waterway “to prevent people and others goods into the area.” A bill was submitted to the Majlis (parliament) to enable the AFZ, which encircles the two cities, to carry out the construction of walls and barricades.

The AFZ is located along the narrowest and most strategically sensitive part of the Shatt al-Arab and includes a large number of Revolutionary Guards naval posts. The AFZ’s security element has strengthened covert operations inside Iraq, with the objectives of securing an early exit of Coalition troops, influencing Iraq’s political system and using patronage to control local authorities in Basra. The AFZ is also being used to train, fund and organise militias loyal to Tehran. Documents from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps’ (IRGC) Fajr Garrison in Khuzestan, which serves as the organisation’s main headquarters for southern Iran, show that Tehran is employing up to 40,000 agents in Iraq. The information was first revealed in March 2005 by former Iranian agents who defected due to pay cuts and subsequently confirmed by Coalition troops in Iraq.

The Shatt al-Arab is the most politically sensitive area of the Middle East. Whoever controls the waterway controls movements from Iraq to the Gulf, including oil shipments, as well as serving as an important trade route for the entire west of Iran. Control over the disputed waterway led to wars between the Persian and Ottoman empires in the 17th and 19th centuries and more recently Iraq and Iran. The narrowness of the Shatt Al-Arab also enabled Iran and Iraq to stage large-scale amphibious assaults during the war. In February 1986, 30,000 Iranian troops crossed the Shatt Al-Arab in a surprise attack to invade and occupy Iraq’s Al-Faw peninsula and create a bridgehead for further advances into Iraq.
Poverty

Although Khuzestan is the most resource-rich province in Iran, the indigenous Ahwazi Arab population suffers from some of the country’s highest levels of unemployment, health problems, child malnutrition and other poverty indicators. Poverty is intimately bound up with ethnic discrimination.

Housing

In urban areas, Ahwazi Arabs live in shanty towns which resemble the townships of apartheid South Africa and are cut off from non-Arab settlements with separation walls (see Land: Separation walls). In Ahwaz City, the most notorious slums are Shekarabad, Shilingabad, Akhar-e-Esfalt, Zirgan, Pich-e-Kazami, Ameri, Kut Abdollah and Hasirabad. These areas lack most of the everyday necessities such as plumbing, electricity, telephone, pavements, street lighting, public transport, sewerage systems, schools, clinics, hospitals, shops and parks. The conditions in the slums are in stark contrast to the non-Arab areas of Ahwaz City. The deprivation in Ahwazi Arab areas means that they constantly stand on the brink of civil unrest. Most rioting in Khuzestan occurs in these areas of extreme poverty.

According to research by the Middle East Forum, a group of progressive and left-wing Iranian activists,

Khuzestan has a population of 4.35 million, of which about a million are shanty town-dwellers - one third of the urban population. Khuzestan is the richest province in Iran, where all the oil is located, yet one third of its urban population lives illegally in appalling conditions.  

Shanty towns “lack basic amenities and are threatened both by the natural elements and

10 Mehdi Kia and Ardeshir Mehrdad, Mobilise the Dispossessed, Weekly Worker 661, 22 February 2007
(http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/661/shanty.htm)
Poverty is largely related to forced displacement and land confiscation, which, according to the Middle East Forum, was designed to take the labourers off the land and drive them into the towns. The combination of ethnic repression, the language barrier and the unskilled nature of their work meant they had to compete unequally in the labour market. So within the proletariat, minorities ended up at the bottom of the pile. The role of the state was and remains central in this - not only because it used the security argument to bring about their dispossession, but because it is also the biggest single employer.\(^\text{12}\)

Following a visit to Khuzestan in July 2005, UN Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, condemned the land confiscation programme aimed at Arabs and the fact that economic development was by-passing the indigenous population. In an interview, he said:

When you visit Ahwaz ... there are thousands of people living with open sewers, no sanitation, no regular access to water, electricity and no gas connections ... why is that? Why have certain groups not benefited? ... Again in Khuzestan, ... we drove outside the city about 20 km and we visited the areas where large development projects are coming up - sugar cane plantations and other projects along the river - and the estimate we received is that between 200,000-250,000 Arab people are being displaced from their villages because of these projects. And the question that comes up in my mind is, why is it that these projects are placed directly on the lands that have been homes for these people for generations? I asked the officials, I asked the people we were with. And there is other land in Khuzestan where projects could have been placed which would have minimised the displacement.\(^\text{13}\)

Kothari criticised the "attempt being made by the government to build new towns and bring in new people from other provinces", singling out Shirinshah for criticism.

His comments were supported by Majid Naasseri-Nejad, a member of parliament representing the Arab populated area of Fallahieah (Shadegan), who in February 2006 called on Iran's Oil Minister Kazem Vaziri-Hamaneh to ensure equitable employment practices in the oil-rich Arab-majority province of Khuzestan or face impeachment, according to reports. Naasseri-Nejad claimed that the Oil Ministry had been placing recruitment advertisements in Shiraz, Isfahan, Mashhad, Tehran and other cities and provinces, but was not actively recruiting from the local Arab population. Some Arab districts are enduring unemployment rates of up to 90%.

### Unemployment

According to the Middle East Forum’s research,

The official unemployment rate for the whole of Iran is said to be around 12% and increasing, but the actual figure is way above that. In Khuzestan over the last 10 years official unemployment has risen from 16% to 18%. So in this, the richest province, already high unemployment is rising. It is here that the largest movement of the workforce from the official to the unofficial economy takes place.\(^\text{14}\)

Official statistics tend to underplay the real extent of unemployment, which is rising to well over 50% among Ahwazi Arab youth and women. Statistics show that 1.46 million

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\(^{11}\) Ibid
\(^{12}\) Ibid
live in the countryside, where official unemployment reaches 20%, although problems of under-employment mean the actual rate is likely to be far higher. Despite the province's fertility and potential in agriculture, farms are suffering from a lack of investment and are under-performing, leading to rural poverty. Ahwazi NGOs believe that urban poverty is far worse than the government is prepared to admit. The unemployment rate in the province’s Persian majority city of Dezful is 7%, whereas in the Arab majority cities of Abadan and Mohammerah (Khorramshahr) the rate is 31% and 50% respectively.

High poverty rates are the result of racial discrimination in employment. Ahwazi Arabs are denied jobs, while the government confiscates their land for residential developments to house non-Arabs enticed from outside the province with incentives such as zero-interest loans.

Even in the formal economy, Ahwazi Arabs are faced with non-payment of wages and the severe restriction of labour rights. Throughout 2006 and into 2007, hundreds of workers employed at port facilities and ship building industries in Mohammareh (Khorramshahr) and Abadan held protests complaining that their wages were months in arrears. These protests have frequently erupted into rioting and strike action. The port owners responded to strike action in 2006 by sacking protestors, who were also subject to arrest and torture by the police. These included workers employed by Armin Gostar in Abadan who were sacked for protesting against non-payment of wages and lack of labour rights, according to the semi-official Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA).

Striking Ahwazi port-workers were joined by workers in other industries. In late 2006, employees of Jangineh Brick Baking Factory staged protests outside the governor's office in Ahwaz, the provincial capital, claiming they had not been paid for 12 months and had not received annual bonuses for two years.

Arabs are faced with discrimination in the civil service. Of the top 25 governmental positions, only two or three are Arabs. This 10-15% ratio of Arabs to non-Arabs in the Ahwaz City administration drops to less than 5% at the provincial level. This means that almost 70% of the population of Khuzestan (the Arabs) hold less than 15% of the key and important governmental positions.

**Education**

Most Arab villages have no schools. While the illiteracy rate in Iran is about 10%-18%, it is over 50% among Arab men in Khuzestan and even higher for Ahwazi women. In non-industrial rural areas such as Fallahieh (Shadegan), illiteracy among women is close to 100%. Indigenous Ahwazi students drop out of schools at a rate of 30% at elementary level, 50% at secondary and 70% at high school because they are forced to study the “official language”, Farsi, a language which is not their's. During the 2000/01 academic year, Arabs comprised only 7% of the 30,000 students at the University of Shaheed Chamran in Ahwaz City, although Arabs are in the majority in the provincial capital. The learning of Arabic is confined to religious study and is commonly classical Arabic rather than the local dialect. Consequently, Ahwazi Arabs are often semi-literate in their native language, but struggle with learning in a language that is foreign to them.

**Health**

According to the *Islamic Republic* newspaper, the Governor of Dashte-Azdegan in Khuzestan declared that his region has the country’s highest incidence of child

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15 Khuzestan is the richest province, but ..., Karoon newspaper, 6 May 2007
malnutrition. Dr Balali, director of the Dashte-Azedegan Health Network, claimed that 80% of children in the district suffered from malnutrition.17

Residents of war torn Arab cities of Khafajieh, Falahieh (Shadegan) and Susangard suffer from unusually high rates of skin, heart and kidney disease due to continued storage and use of chemical and biological materials and other related pollutants remaining from the war. The government has not taken any action to remedy the situation.

In most towns in the province – Bostan, Hovazeh and Dashte Azadegan – the local population has little or no access to hospitals or specialist doctors. In these cities, sick people frequently die needlessly during emergencies, such as accidents or in childbirth. In Ahwaz City, state-run hospitals are unhygienic, with insufficient numbers of doctors or medicines and death rates are unacceptably high. Wealthier middle-class people, mostly non-Arab residents, can afford private healthcare, while the indigenous population has to cope with a poorly resourced and inadequate state healthcare system.

HIV/AIDS rates in the province are rising at a fast rate due to the increasing use of intravenous drugs by the Ahwazi underclass as well as the use of unscreened infected blood imported from other countries. AIDS patients are living in hospitals without access to any facilities or medicines and the government refuses to disclose death rates, so the exact figure of AIDS-related deaths is unknown.

Ahwazi Arab farmlands are heavily contaminated with industrial pollution and the detritus of war, leading to serious birth defects as well as skin and respiratory diseases (see Environment). All sewerage is dumped untreated into the main River Karoon, which supplies all the Ahwaz City’s water. As a result, water is contaminated and undrinkable.

Dr Nasser Soudani, parliamentary representative for Ahwaz City, has highlighted the problem of drinking water, which is contaminated and regularly cut off despite the region's large rivers and reservoirs. He laid the blame on the demand for water from sugar cane plantations, which were established after the government confiscated thousands of hectares of land from Ahwazi Arab farmers.

17 Islamic Republic newspaper, Issue 7207, 2 June, 2004
Women’s rights

Iranian government’s treatment of women is widely accepted to be repressive. Women are forced to wear the hijab (veil), pay blood money, gain their husband’s consent for divorce and are often forced into arranged marriages. The ban on women filing for divorce without the consent of their husbands causes many problems and many women suffer harm in abusive marriages because of this law. Additionally, if a woman gets divorced, she is not allowed to keep her children; both children and women suffer under this law. Women in Iran are also forced into marriages by their parents, even when they are children. Many of these marriages are not successful and some women are subjected to domestic violence, but they are not protected by the law. Ahwazi Arab women share these problems with their non-Arab sisters in Iran. But they also suffer from ethnic discrimination and racism, making them the most disadvantaged group in Iranian society.

Due to discrimination in education, almost all Ahwazi women living in rural areas are illiterate. Honour killing of Ahwazi women is common, particularly in rural areas, and many suffer from serious gynaecological and other health problems due to lack of access to healthcare facilities. Ahwazi women’s rights activists lay the blame on the Iranian government for ethnic discrimination, which has led to backward attitudes towards divorce and women’s health. The situation is made worse by the provincial government’s refusal to appoint an Ahwazi to the role of women’s officer. Women lack political agency due to the ethnic and gender discrimination in education and employment and are often confined to the home.

On International Women’s Day 2007, activists from the Ahwazi Arab Women’s Network based in the UK released the following statement:

Women’s history is about their desire to participate with men on an equal footing to build the community and fight against sexual discrimination alongside the fight against ethnic discrimination. This is what the Ahwazi woman suffers and she has not yet been rescued from discrimination.
Although the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian women, she has made no mention of the suffering of Ahwazi Arabs in general and Ahwazi women struggle in particular. But despite this, Ahwazi women alone break social, economic and politics system’s barriers which were put in their way by successive Iranian regimes on the one hand and customs and traditions on the other hand. This has meant that Ahwazi women are fighting on different fronts, which has exposed them to horrific levels of pressure.

The international community should shoulder its responsibility towards Ahwazi and non-Persian women rights in Iran and should not remain indifferent, silent and ignorant about their oppression. They are subjected to racial and sexual discrimination under the Iranian regime due to its belief that women are second-class and that Ahwazi Arabs are second degree citizens. The international community should not be in collusion with this regime by focusing on the nuclear program while remaining silent on other human right violations, especially women’s rights and the issues of non-Persian nations in Iran.

Today is an opportunity to evaluate the role of Ahwazi women. It is also an opportunity to remember Ahwazi women right activists who sacrificed their lives, their sons, fathers and their husbands for struggle of our just cause.

The following is an excerpt from a statement by Makhale Tshifhiwa on behalf of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and in association with Ahwazi Human Rights Organization (AHRO) at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (15-26 May 2006) under Item 4 (c) Ongoing priorities and themes: “Indigenous Children, Youth and Women”:

Ahwazi women are not only being denied basic rights and the opportunity to conduct peaceful political activities in an atmosphere conducive to positive change, but also, following recent episodes, they fear being arrested without charge and held in detention with no access to legal assistance. In recent months and weeks, reports by several human rights organizations clearly demonstrate the violation of the basic rights of indigenous Ahwazi women and their children.

On behalf of UNPO I express concern at how these indigenous women have suffered ill-treatment and been held unlawfully with their children in custody. We appeal to the Permanent Forum to urge Iran to develop specific non-discriminatory policies towards women; to enhance the situation of women in Iran and in particular indigenous Ahwazi women; to provide and ensure that their basic rights are respected and that these women do not suffer the arbitrary arrest and detention based on the activities of their husbands; that women and men alike are free to voice political dissent when expressed through non-violent and legitimate means. Whilst we appeal for the urgent release of indigenous women, we call upon the Permanent Forum to gather data and information about the situation of indigenous women in Khuzestan and the larger region; and to distribute this information to lay the basis for further recommendations for the authorities in Iran.
**Human rights**

In 2006, the wives of four prominent Ahwazi rights activists were imprisoned by the Iranian authorities in order to force their husbands to confess to committing terrorist acts.\(^{18}\)

These included:

- Masouma Kaabi and her son Aimad (4)
- Soghra Khuddayrawal and her son Zeydan (4)
- Hoda Hawashem and her sons Ahmad (4) and Osameh (2) (pictured above)

The women were held for months along with their young children, who were aged between two and four. Two pregnant women were also held in detention. One of the women, Sakina Naisi, suffered a miscarriage due to poor treatment she received in prison. Sakina was taken into custody in February when she was three months pregnant and was reportedly subjected to physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her prison guards. Sakina is the wife of Ahmad Naisi, a prominent political activist wanted by the authorities. Following her arrest, the authorities destroyed her husband's family home in the Sho'aybiyeh district of Ahwaz City with bulldozers.

In March 2006, Fahima Isma'ili gave birth to girl in prison, but refused government demands for her to renounce her husband as a British spy and divorce him. She also refused to give her girl a Persian name or pay three billion rials (US$330,000) for her release. Her captors told her that her husband had disowned her and the baby and did not care if they were killed. Nevertheless, Fahima refused to give into the regime's demands. Consequently her husband, Ali Madouri-Zadeh, an Ahwazi opposition activist and founding member of the moderate Hizb al-Wifaq (Reconciliation Party), was executed in December 2006 and she was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.

**Employment**

The non-payment of wages for male Ahwazi workers (see Poverty: Employment) has forced many Ahwazi women to seek employment in the informal sector as roadside hawkers. According to the semi-official Fars News Agency, the number of female pavement sellers in the Arab majority cities is soaring.\(^{19}\) A report published by the news agency in October 2006 found that the age of female Ahwazi Arab hawkers, who sell food and handicrafts from the villages as well as smuggled goods such as cigarettes and chewing gum, is also falling.

**Healthcare**

In the area of women's health, many women go through childbirth without specialist doctors and unnecessary deaths occur far too frequently. Few women are allowed by religious law to be attended by a male doctor, and there are not enough female doctors and virtually none who are fluent in the Arabic language.

**Honour killings**

Extra-judicial honour killing is an endemic problem in Ahwazi Arab society and targets women alleged to have had extra-marital relations and alleged homosexual men. The

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Iranian government has used such social taboos to humiliate ‘troublesome’ members of tribal or political groups. Killings are carried out by family members to save their family or tribal honour. The Iranian government has forbidden any sort of civil society and NGOs in raising awareness of these kinds of crimes. Ahwazi culture is not barbaric; it is retarded by political oppression and economic marginalisation.

Iran's *Ham-Mihn* newspaper has reported the case of an Ahwazi woman who was buried alive by her father in April 2007 (both pictured right). Villagers had accused her of having an extra-marital affair after she divorced her husband, prompting her father to kill her for the sake of family honour. He admitted killing his 22 year old daughter Nejat, but claimed she agreed to be buried alive and even helped to dig her own grave. After Nejat's mother learnt of the killing, her husband threatened to bury her alive if she reported the murder to the authorities. Nejat's two year old daughter has since been taken to an orphanage in Ahwaz City.20

Ahwazi women's rights activists condemned the murder, but laid the blame on Khuzestan's provincial government for failing to empower Arab women. It has never employed an Arab woman to head the women's affairs, although Arabs are the largest ethnic group in the province. Most appointed to the role are middle-class Persian women from Tehran who have no understanding of Ahwazi culture.

One Ahwazi women's rights activist told the British Ahwazi Friendship Society that Nejat's story is just one example of how women are being killed by their relatives due to baseless gossip. Honour killing should be challenged everywhere. It is even happening in the UK and all over the Middle East. Whereas the British authorities are tackling the problem, the Iranians appear to be encouraging it.

An Ahwazi woman should be appointed to set up education programmes to combat this criminal practice and Ahwazi NGOs should be encouraged to assist in ending the practice. But so long as the provincial government discriminates against Arabs in government appointments and so long as it represses civil society, honour killings will continue.

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20 Woman buried alive for honour, International Campaign Against Honour Killings, 31 May 2007
(http://www.stophonourkillings.com/News/article/sid=1723.html)
Political freedoms and human rights

Although all Iranian citizens suffer political repression and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, state violence against Ahwazi Arabs is more extreme than against critics in Tehran. Any form of Arab political mobilisation has been crushed, with the government executing anyone suspected of engaging in minority rights activism.

Ahwazi Arab minority rights activists are portrayed by the Iranian government as representing all that it regards as “evil”. The government and its supporters routinely denounce Ahwazi rights activists as Satanic, Wahhabi (Sunni extremists), Ba’thist or agents working on behalf of the Israeli, British, US or Saudi governments. Although Ahwazi activists campaign against social, cultural, economic and political exclusion, the government insists they have a religious agenda that is antithetical to the theocratic establishment, the “source of truth.” Consequently, Ahwazi dissidents are often put on trial for “enmity with God”, which is punishable by death.

Constitutional rights

The Islamic Republic ignored the demands of national groups, but attempted to mollify the situation by enshrining cultural and linguistic rights in its Constitution. Article 15 of the Constitution states:

The Official Language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.
Article 19 states
All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.

However, these constitutional rights have been systematically undermined by consecutive administrations. Amnesty International notes that

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, individuals belonging to minorities in Iran, who are believed to number about half of the population of about 70 millions, are subject to an array of discriminatory laws and practices. These include land and property confiscations, denial of state and para-statal employment under the gozinessh criteria and restrictions on social, cultural, linguistic and religious freedoms which often result in other human rights violations such as the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience, grossly unfair trials of political prisoners before Revolutionary Courts, corporal punishment and use of the death penalty, as well as restrictions on movement and denial of other civil rights.

Ahwazis’ constitutional rights have been routinely violated and they are denied the right to contest free and fair elections on an Arab rights platform. With no legal outlet for expressing their grievances or appeal for social equality, frustrations often boil over into civil unrest. Amid this discontent, some Ahwazis have resorted to violence and bomb attacks by a minority of disillusioned youth.

Political freedoms
Following the Iran-Iraq War, Ahwazis began asserting their cultural distinctiveness through religious celebrations and poetry events, which were used to declare Ahwazi rights and aspirations. In 1999, Ahwazi activists set up the Lejnat al-Wefaq (Reconciliation Committee) to achieve formal recognition of Ahwazi rights within the framework of the constitution. They participated in elections and succeeded in winning a seat in parliament as well as control of Ahwaz City Council. However, in the 2004 parliamentary elections, the government barred candidates nominated by Wefaq. The group was dismantled and banned, closing down legal possibilities for demands for Ahwazi rights.

On 15 April 2005, tens of thousands of Ahwazis took to the streets in protest to raise their voice against ethnic cleansing policies. The government briefly lost control over large parts of the province in the peaceful uprising or intifada. The security forces responded with extreme violence, with at least 160 state killings and thousands of arrests within the space of just two weeks. Dead bodies of Ahwazis killed by the police were thrown into the rivers and were retrieved in fishing nets. Many more were convicted of waging war against God. Some 28,000 people were arrested in the year following the April intifada.

The wives and children of Ahwazi activists have been arrested and held as hostages in an attempt to lure activists from exile (see Women’s rights). The repression has extended beyond Iran. Ahwazi activists have been murdered by Iranian-backed death squads in Iraq. Ahwazi refugees have also been imprisoned in Syria and one has been returned to Iran to face torture and certain death – in complete contravention of international law.

The justice system
Ahwazi dissidents charged with ‘enmity with God’ invariably face secret trials by Revolutionary Courts, with little or no access to their lawyers. Trials last no more than a few hours, with no witness statements and prosecution “evidence” relying on confessions extracted through torture. In many cases, dissidents are forced to give televised confessions on the state-run provincial television station Khuzestan TV, in which they admit to working on behalf of foreign governments – particularly the UK and Israel – and exiled Ahwazi parties to commit terrorist attacks in Iran. Defence lawyers have also been intimidated, arrested and charged with acting against national security in an effort to ensure that legal representatives enter guilty pleas on behalf of their clients.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have campaigned against the unfair trials of Ahwazi Arabs. Amnesty International released the following statement in February 2007 following a wave of executions of Ahwazi Arabs; Human Rights Watch issued a similar statement.22 23

Amnesty International greatly deplores the execution of four Iranian Arabs on 14 February 2007 and is concerned that other prisoners are at risk of execution after unfair trials.

The organization is calling on the Iranian authorities to immediately halt executions and to ensure that all persons in detention are protected from torture or other ill-treatment. To date in 2007, Amnesty International has recorded no less than 28 executions in Iran, including the four on 14 February 2007.

One of the four men, Risan Sawari, a 32-year-old teacher, was reportedly executed yesterday in an unknown location in Khuzestan. His family was reportedly informed of his execution but his body is yet to be released for burial. Risan Sawari had reportedly been arrested in April 2005, released and arrested again in September 2005.

Although seven men were said to have been convicted of involvement in bomb attacks in October 2005 - which caused the deaths of at least six people and wounded more than a hundred others, in Ahvaz city, Khuzestan province - nine men, including Risan Sawari, were shown "confessing" on Khuzestan TV, a local government-controlled television station in Iran, on 1 March 2006. Among them were Mehdi Nawaseri and Ali Awdeh Afrawi, who were hanged in public the following morning.

On 10 June 2006 Branch 3 of the Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz had reportedly confirmed the death sentences against Risan Sawari along with nine other men. According to reports, the 10 men were accused of being mohareb (at enmity with God) which can carry the death penalty. Evidence against them reportedly included "destabilising the country", "attempting to overthrow the government", "possession of home made bombs", "sabotage of oil installations" and carrying out bombings in Ahvaz, which took place between June and October 2005. It is not known if the death sentence against Risan Sawari was upheld by the Supreme Court.

In a separate case, the other three men executed together - believed to be Abdulreza Sanawati Zergani, Qasem Salamat and Majed Al-Boghubaish - were reportedly convicted, together with seven others, of being mohareb (at enmity with God) on account of their alleged involvement in bomb attacks in 2005 in Ahvaz city, Khuzestan province. They are reported to have been held in solitary confinement for months...
during, and possibly after, their pre-trial detention and to have been convicted and sentenced after grossly unfair trials, which included denial of access to lawyers.

In an interview at the end of January 2007 with the Netherlands-based Radio Zamaneh, Iranian human rights defender, Emaddedin Baghi, who has been closely following the cases, stated that "they did not have access to lawyers and were kept in solitary confinement for months. They did not receive a fair trial."

On 13 November 2006, Khuzestan TV, broadcast a documentary film in which the three men executed yesterday and six of the seven others convicted in the same case, were shown “confessing” to involvement in causing bomb explosions. They were said to be members of Al-e, an Iranian Arab militant group that is not known to have been active since the time of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

On 10 January 2007, three leading UN human rights experts - Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Leandro Despouy, UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers; and Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur on torture - jointly called on the government of Iran to "stop the imminent execution of seven men belonging to the Ahwazi Arab minority and grant them a fair and public hearing." The UN experts stated: "We are fully aware that these men are accused of serious crimes ... However, this cannot justify their conviction and execution after trials that made a mockery of due process requirements."

The seven individuals to whom the UN experts referred were Mohammad Jaab Pour, Abdulamir Farjallah Jaab, Alireza Asakreh and Khalaf Derhab Khudayrawi, all of whom were executed on 24 January 2007 and the three men who were executed earlier today.

Three other Iranian Arabs - named as Abdullah Suleymani, Malek Banitamim and Ali Matouri Zadeh - are reported to have been executed on 19 December 2006 in a prison in Khuzestan province.

At least 17 other Iranian Arabs are believed to be facing execution after unfair trials in which they were convicted of involvement in bombings in Khuzestan in 2005.

**Death penalty**

Statistics published by Amnesty International indicate that in 2006 Iran’s execution rate nearly doubled compared to 2005, with at least 177 people killed. Across the world, at least 1,591 prisoners were executed by their own governments in 25 countries last year.\(^{24}\) According to reports received by the British Ahwazi Friendship Society (BAFS), around 17 Ahwazi Arabs were executed by the Iranian regime in 2006. At least 10 of these were political prisoners. The executions of Ahwazi Arabs were carried out after secret one-day trials which were condemned as flawed by UN experts, the European Parliament, members of the British Parliament, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and various Arab and Iranian human rights organisations and activists.

\(^{24}\) http://web.amnesty.org/pages/392-260407-feature-eng
Based on 2006 data, an Ahwazi Arab is around 13 times more likely to be executed than the global average and 30% more likely than the average Iranian. While Ahwazi Arabs account for just 0.08% of the global population, Ahwazi Arabs comprised around 1% of global executions.

These statistics do not include secret killings and “disappearances”. The bodies of Ahwazi activists who have vanished have been dumped into rivers, hung from lamp posts or left burnt and charred on the doorsteps of their relatives. Pictured here is an Ahwazi farmer, Sultan Albu-Shokeh, an amputee who had his leg blown off by a landmine. He was captured and shot in the thigh of his amputated leg and underneath his chin in a summary killing.

Many Ahwazi activists are buried in unmarked mass graves. Below is a picture of Lanat Abad (Place of the Damned), located near Ahwaz City. Ahwazi dissidents are buried here, but a lack of adequate signage means that relatives do not know where the dead are buried. Often the authorities demand extortionate amounts of money for the release of bodies, along with a substantial charge for the cost of the bullets that killed them.
Environment

A large proportion of the Ahwazi Arab population depend on farming and fishing for its livelihood. However, they are paying the price for industrial projects that pollute the environment, operated by companies that discriminate against Arabs. The Iranian government is also carrying out a river diversion project that is seeing local waters redirected to dry areas of Iran, such as Yazd and Rafsanjan. Of particular concern is the Karoon River, which is an essential water source for agriculture as well as fishing. The Karoon is suffering from high levels of industrial pollutants and a river diversion project that together threaten major ecological disaster and further impoverishment of indigenous Arabs. Disruptions to water supplies force many Ahwazis to rely on contaminated water from the Karoon, which contains high levels of human sewage and industrial pollutants. Fishermen are reporting outbreaks of disease in fish and a sharp decline in fish numbers, indicating that Iran's mismanagement of water resources has devastated river life.

Water security

Flooding
Khuzestan's rivers often overflow and flood areas populated by Ahwazi Arabs. The government's failure to desilt the rivers has contributed to the problem. The Karoon and Karkhe rivers that flow through the province flooded hundreds of Ahwazi homes in early 2006, although there had been no rain. A 170 km stretch of land from Ahwaz to Mohammara (Khorramshahr) was under water, devastating crops just one month ahead of the harvest. Ahwazi Arab farmers faced hunger and homelessness as a result of the regime's refusal to prevent flooding.

Mohammad Said Ansari, parliamentary representative for Abadan, said that the flooding was deliberately caused by the authorities who had refused to dredge and desilt the Karoon and Bahmanshir rivers. The government is trying to create the impression that the province has enough water reserves to divert water to dry provinces such as Rafsanjan, he said. Ansari has called for an immediate investigation into the cause of the rising water in Karoon and Karkhe and compensation and housing for those affected. Parliamentary representative for Abadan Abdullah Kaabi had repeatedly called on the
Ministry of Energy and Power to dredge the Bahmanshir river and repair levees to prevent flooding. Kaabi concluded that the ministry is therefore directly responsible for the humanitarian disaster. He also attacked emergency services for failing to intervene to alleviate the problems facing Ahwazi Arabs affected by floods.

Despite the floods, Ahwazi Arabs lack access to clean water supplies. In October 2006, the Fars News Agency reported that members of the Sharifat family living in Chah Salem in Omideh (Al-Amedeya) died due to a lack of clean water. While desperately digging for water, family members inhaled poisonous gas escaping from the ground. Four family members died and three others were hospitalised. A member of the emergency crew sent to rescue the family was also overcome by the fumes. The news agency’s reporter claimed that there was a lack of rescue facilities in the area and that the rural population was suffering drought and severe under-development.25

River diversion
In the long-term, water security is threatened by the diversion of the Karoon River, the largest river to flow through Ahwazi lands. 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 species of fish as well as migratory birds. The level of anger among Ahwazi Arabs has forced local representatives to appeal to the government to halt the project.

In January 2006, local members of parliament threatened to resign their seats in protest at the diversion of the Karoon.26 They claimed that it would seriously undermine water security and the livelihoods of many farmers in the Arab-majority province. In December 2005, the MPs launched a petition to impeach Energy Minister Parviz Fatah over the project.27

Nevertheless, in June 2007, Fatah rejected the United Nation Environment Programme’s (UNEP) concerns over the environmental impact of the government’s Karoon River diversion project, despite claims that it will create an environmental disaster on the scale of the Aral Sea in Central Asia. According to local media reports, Fatah said that the government would instead step up its river diversion programme, 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.28

UNEP has officially warned the Iranian Environment Association that the southwest of Iran and south of Iraq are facing a situation similar to the environmental catastrophes that have affected the Aral Sea in Central Asia and the Amazon jungle. 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. Dam projects in Turkey and Iraq as well as river diversion projects such as Iraq’s Saddam Canal have decimated the marshland, reducing it to a tenth of its original size.

Iran’s current project of transferring the waters of the Karoun River to desertified Iranian provinces will have major consequences for the marshland, according to environmental

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28 http://www.sepehrnews.ir/?p,4513
activists. They point to the impact of river diversion on the Aral Sea, which has seen thousands of people lose their jobs in the fishing industry, a lack of drinking water, high rates of infant mortality, still births and deformities, high cancer rates, respiratory illnesses and skin problems. 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 spell disaster for their livelihoods and well-being.

**Industrial pollution**

In most of the province's towns and cities, water is polluted with industrial wastes and open sewers running through the middle of the streets. Emissions from industries have led to respiratory problems among the local population. While local Ahwazi Arabs are suffering the health problems associated with the petrochemical industry, most are barred from employment due to racial discrimination. For the Ahwazis, it is a lose-lose situation.

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Karoon has faced more than 400 incidents of serious contamination. In 2005, the government paid 700 billion rials (US$76.5 million) for a pistachio cultivation programme in the ethnically Persian Rafsanjan province, but just 100 billion rials (US$10.9 million) for water management in Khuzestan province. Environmental degradation is simply not a priority for the government, because it does not care about the effects on the indigenous Ahwazi population.

At an environmental conference at Azad University held in Ahwaz City in December 2006, Dr Hormoz Mahmmodi Rad, the head of Khuzestan's environmental organisation, described the situation affecting the province's natural environment as 'worrying' and 'chaotic' with serious consequences for human health. He emphasised the need for planned industrial development with action to stop the industrial pollutants from pouring into the Karoon River. Dr Mahmmodi Rad warned that the province's natural environment was in a perilous state, with biodiversity in the marshlands severely threatened and some animal species could face extinction as a result of industrial pollution.

For instance, in Khafjeh, in the western part of the province, the situation has become so bad that schools are failing to provide safe drinking water to children and have closed. Anger over water management has fuelled anti-government sentiment among Ahwazi Arabs. In a documentary, one Arab tells the interviewer: "We went to the provincial governor, but the government doesn't care. They are feeding the Palestinians, but forgetting about us." Another says: "If we are Israelis, then kill us. But we are Iranians, so why are we treated like dogs?"

The Bandar Imam petrochemical complex (circled) is causing major environmental devastation, according to two of Iran's leading ecologists. Research by Dr Abbas Ismail Sari and Dr Bahram Kiaee found that a large area of Khuzestan (Ahwaz) is seriously affected by pollution from mercury and other dangerous
chemicals used in petrochemicals manufacturing.\textsuperscript{31} The academics found that birds from the falcon family, at the top of the food chain, contained 2mg per kg of body weight - an extraordinarily high level. The symptoms of mercury poisoning in humans - including diarrhoea, depression, memory loss and mental retardation - start at 1.7mg per kg of body weight. As a result of mercury poisoning, the birds and their eggs are smaller than usual. Their study of mercury in birds in the province concluded that pollution is widespread in Khuzestan. Fish stocks are also severely affected.

UNEP states that mercury has caused a variety of documented, significant adverse impacts on human health and the environment throughout the world. Mercury and its compounds are highly toxic, especially to the developing nervous system. The toxicity to humans and other organisms depends on the chemical form, the amount, the pathway of exposure and the vulnerability of the person exposed. Human exposure to mercury can result from a variety of pathways, including, but not limited to, consumption of fish, occupational and household uses, dental amalgams and mercury-containing vaccines.\textsuperscript{32}

In October 2006, there were reports that thousands of fish died off the coast of Mahshahr due to toxic chemicals from the petrochemical complex run by the Bandar Imam Petrochemical Company.\textsuperscript{33} This has severely affected the livelihoods and health of local Arab fishermen. Qatar banned imports of seafood from Iran due to radioactive contamination, indicating that marine pollution is a long-term industrial disaster.

Speaking to the British Ahwazi Friendship Society, Ali Ghanawati, a fisherman from Hendijan port, southwest of Ahwaz, said:

\begin{quote}
The problem was started by Bandar Imam chemical factory. Over the past 20 years, it has got worse and worse. Now they are set up more petrochemical factories. The colour of the flesh of fresh fish is blue instead of a healthy red or pink. Cancer is increasing rapidly and my brother recently died of cancer.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Rapid development and industrialization in particular, pollution, over-fishing, dam building, aquaculture, breeding and introduction of non-indigenous species of fish has lead to the disappearance of two major species of fish unique to Gamasyab River - the Shirbot and Soleymani. The Gamasyab River is the origin of the Karkeh river, which flows through Khuzestan. It "is the habitat of many endangered species of large tropical and semi-tropical region fresh water fishes. They include Barbus tetrazona and Barbus oligolepis which were formerly seen in abundance in the river."\textsuperscript{36}

**Nuclear energy**

The construction of nuclear power plants in Khuzestan, which is an earthquake zone, is of major concern to Ahwazi Arabs. In October 2006, in a meeting with Khuzestan's head of energy, Iran's Deputy Energy Minister Mohammad Ahmadian confirmed that the government was studying the possibility of two new nuclear power plants in the province. The government is resurrecting plans drawn up under the Shah, who had signed a contract with the French government in 1969 to construct a nuclear power station near


\[33\] http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/2006/10/iran-pollution-threatens-ahwazi.html

\[34\] http://www.shana.ir/NewsView.aspx?NewsId=55607&Type=1&Subject=1&ShowMod=C


the towns of Falahieh (Shadegan) and Mohammareh (Khorramshahr). The plans were never fully realised. The current regime now plans to use Russian technology to construct a power station.

Ahwazi Arabs are concerned about safety, fearing that the use of Russian technology in inexperienced Iranian hands could lead to a Chernobyl-like disaster, which will affect the entire region. Many Ahwazis and others living near sites for future nuclear power plants in Ahwaz and Bushehr are concerned about safety in this earthquake-prone region. The nuclear power station currently under construction and the source of international controversy is being located near Bushehr city, which has been destroyed by earthquakes on three occasions and is near the same geological faultline as the earthquake that destroyed Bam in 2003. Any tremors on a Richter Scale of 7 could crack containment at the Bushehr power station and any nuclear facility located in Khuzestan. But if these power plants go ahead, any earthquake on the magnitude of the recent major earthquake in Pakistan, which measured 7.6 on the Richter scale, would be of major consequence to the people of the Gulf region.
Ahwazi refugees

Ahwazi refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have faced persecution and discrimination outside Iran. Ahwazis found sanctuary in Iraq and Syria at times when Iran’s relations with these countries were poor, during the 1980s. However, following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iran’s Iraqi allies were quick to evict Ahwazis from their homes. Meanwhile, Syria, under pressure from Iran, arrested a number of Ahwazi refugees and deported some back to Iran, where were arrested on arrival and tortured. Ahwazi refugees also report harassment by Iranian agents in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Iraq

Following the invasion of Iraq by US-led forces in 2003, Ahwazi Arabs have faced harassment and persecution by militias supported by or sympathetic to the Iranian regime. Thousands of Ahwazi Arab refugees were living in Iraq before the invasion, many of whom had fled the fighting in the Iran-Iraq War. In 2003, the UNHCR estimated there were 6,700 Ahwazi refugees in Iraq, mainly in Dujaila and Kumiet. Before the Iraq War, the refugee settlement in Dujaila, 400km north of Basra city, was home to 5,000 Ahwazi refugees. During the war, Ahwazi “homes, crops and other property [were] confiscated” by Iraqi militias. In a press briefing dated 13 May 2003, the UNHCR stated:

The refugees reported that there was frequent gunfire in the neighbourhood, that food stocks had been depleted, the school had been destroyed and water and electricity had been suspended in the area for more than two months. While the UNHCR team was there, they heard two long bursts of small arms fire in the immediate vicinity. They also observed a truck carrying about a dozen masked men, giving credence to reports heard earlier from the refugees who fled to the Basra area of a systematic campaign of intimidation aimed at the refugees. They even saw a young boy armed with an AK 47 walking away from the settlement. The refugees in Dujaila reported that local Iraqi militias had ordered them to leave. Several other agencies who have visited Dujaila independently have approached UNHCR, and said they believe that the refugees are in great danger, a view that UNHCR shares.37

The situation was so bad that many Ahwazi refugees began requesting repatriation to Iran, despite the dangers they would face there. According to the UNHCR, the Iraqi government’s provision of land, houses and farms for Ahwazi refugees had stoked up resentment from the local population, which regarded them as collaborators with the regime of Saddam Hussein. However, reports received by BAFS suggest that the eviction of Ahwazi Arabs during and after the invasion of Iraq was conducted by the Badr Brigades, which have been used to suppress Ahwazi dissent inside Iran.

The UNHCR COI report of October 2005 indicated that the estimated number of Ahwazi refugees in Iraq was 2,500, indicating that most Ahwazis had left Iraq due to violent intimidation.38 The report stated that violent harassment led to the relocation of some 80 Ahwazi families to a UNHCR transit centre in the outskirts of Basra. The report stated that

They were later evacuated by the Iraqi authorities and ever since have been scattered

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37 “UNHCR condemns intimidation of refugees”, UNHCR briefing notes, 13 May 2003 (http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/3e000d0d714.html)
38 In 2000, UNHCR estimated the number of Ahwazi Arab refugees in Iraq was 10,000 (http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/3e2d4d637.pdf). At the time, the UNHCR reported that it had a good working relationship with the Iraqi government on welfare provision for Ahwazi refugees.
throughout the Southern Governorates. Many attempted to return to Iran, but came back to Iraq due to alleged harassment by the Iranian authorities and difficulties reintegrating following years in exile. UNHCR is aware that the Ahwazis now face problems obtaining new residency permits, which has been an obstacle to obtaining public services such as education... Many Ahwazi refugees face severe problems as regards adequate housing and access to public services such as education and health.\textsuperscript{39} Ahwazi refugees reported that they were suffering malnutrition, discrimination and harassment by the new Iraqi authorities.\textsuperscript{40}

In April 2006, the then Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari ordered the expulsion of Ahwazi refugees from the provinces of Basra and Amarah, according to the al-Fakr al-Islami website.\textsuperscript{41} At the same time, Iraq’s Al-Zaman daily newspaper quoted Basra’s director of education as stating that children of Ahwazi Arab descent are being expelled from Iraqi schools and universities.

Persecution of Ahwazi refugees has been accompanied by a series of murders of Ahwazi dissidents in Iraq by death squads. On 6 April 2006, Ahwazi leader Ra’ad De’ayer Al-Bestan Banitorfi (pictured right) was kidnapped, allegedly by Iraqi intelligence on the orders of the Ministry of the Interior. His body was discovered four days later, with marks of torture and mutilation. His family claim that he had been under surveillance by Iraqi intelligence for weeks before his murder.

**Syria**

According to Article 34 of the Syrian Constitution, the deportation of refugees to countries where they will face persecution should be prevented. Moreover, non-refoulement is a principle of customary international law which prohibits states from returning a refugee or asylum seeker to territories where there is a risk that his or her life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. This principle has precedence over any bilateral or multilateral extradition agreement. In March 2007, there were at least 90 Ahwazi Arab refugees in Syria who have applied for asylum or have been registered with the UNHCR, according to reports received by BAFS.

Despite Syria’s constitutional and legal obligation to provide safe sanctuary to political refugees, the Syrian government...
has deported Ahwazi refugees and asylum seekers to Iran. In May 2006, the Syrian authorities arrested and detained four Ahwazi UNHCR-registered refugees: Faleh Abdullah al-Mansouri (60), President of the Ahwazi Liberation Organisation (ALO) and Dutch national; Rasool Mazrae, ALO member; Taher Ali Mazrae (40), and; Jamal Obeidawi (UNHCR documentation above) (34), Chair of Ahwazi Student Union in Syria. The Syrian government repeatedly told the UNHCR that the men were safe in custody, when in fact they had been transferred to Tehran just days after their arrest. Taher and Rasool Mazrae, who are brothers, were due to be relocated to Norway and Sweden, respectively. Three other Ahwazi refugees – Ahmad Abiat, Mousa Sawari and Issa Alyassin – were also arrested but later released.

In December 2006, the UNHCR suggested that the Syrian government lied to the UN and broke international law when it deported the refugees.\(^2\) UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond said the organisation was “extremely worried” about the four Ahwazis who Syria deported to Iran despite promising not to, and despite resettlement places already having been secured abroad for them. Redmond appealed to Iranian authorities “to ensure the well-being of the four and allow for a fair trial and the right to due process.” He added: “Extradition does not mean that a refugee or asylum seeker loses his or her international protection status. UNHCR also appeals for access to the four refugees and we are prepared to find alternative solutions for them.” The UNHCR has called on Syria to abide by its obligations under international law and to ensure that the principle of non-refoulement is recognised.

However, the Iranian embassy in Damascus has denied any prisoners of conscience had been extradited from Syria to Iran. Speaking to IRIN, an embassy source said: “There is an agreement between Syria and Iran that any Iranian who has been jailed in Syria for a crime can be transferred to complete his sentence in Iran. But no prisoners of conscience have been handed over to Iran by Syria.”\(^3\)

Human rights organisations have expressed concern that the refugees are being tortured. BAFS has received credible reports that the refugees have been tortured and there is a danger that they will be executed.

In April 2007, the Syrian authorities freed five Ahwazi Arab refugees – Afnan Azizi (20), Ahmad Asadi (28), Jaber Ebayat (19), Kamal Naseri (27) and Salahuddin Helali Majd (26) – who had been arrested in Damascus on 5 March. Their release came after intense lobbying efforts by BAFS, AHRO, the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria, members of the European Parliament, the UNHCR and Human Rights Watch.\(^4\) The fate of a sixth Ahwazi arrested in March 2007, 24-year-old Ali Bouazar, who was deported to Iran is unknown. Bouazar had fled Iran after being sentenced to death by a Revolutionary Court. Unlike the other five men, Bouazar had not been registered as a refugee with the UNHCR and was technically an illegal immigrant. BAFS is concerned that Bouazar’s life is in danger and is continuing to research his whereabouts.

BAFS has received reports that as a result of the deportations of Ahwazis from Syria, many UNHCR-registered refugees are now in hiding, with the UN agency failing to meet its obligation to ensure their safety. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has also received similar reports.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) “UNHCR extremely concerned for Ahwazi refugees extradited from Syria to Iran”, Reuters/UNHCR, 22 December 2006 (http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/UNHCR/b033af4c57fe2397defd5e79a66c092.htm)


\(^4\) “Ethnic Arab Refugees Face Persecution if Returned to Iran”, Human Rights Watch, 5 April 2007 (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/04/05/syria15651.htm)

International response

The British government, the House of Commons, the European Commission and the European Parliament have condemned ethnic discrimination against Ahwazi Arabs and other national groups. However, they have concentrated on individual cases of human rights abuse against Ahwazi Arabs, particularly the use of the death penalty, rather than broader issue of ethnic persecution. British government ministers have voiced concern that any proactive stance could cause more problems than it would solve, confirming Iranian propaganda that claims the British government is funding, training and arming separatist organizations. Neither the UK nor the EU have endorsed the Ahwazi Arabs’ right to self-determination or the Mohammerah Declaration of 1979, which embodies the aspirations of Ahwazi Arabs.

United Kingdom

Government

Foreign Minister Kim Howells said:

We have been closely monitoring the case of the Ahwazi Arabs, who have been sentenced to death recently for their alleged role in terrorist activities in Ahwaz, last year.

We oppose and condemn the death penalty in all its forms. In this case, we have specific concerns about the conduct of the trial including whether it was held secretly behind closed doors; whether a jury was present; and whether the defendants had adequate access to lawyers before the trial.

The presidency of the EU raised our concerns about this case with the Director General of the International Department of the Judiciary on 20 November and highlighted the EU’s longstanding objection to the death penalty in all its forms. We will continue to monitor this case closely with EU colleagues.46

The office of William Hague, the Shadow Foreign Secretary and former leader of the Conservative Party, told the British Ahwazi Friendship Society that Foreign Office officials assured him that they are taking the case extremely seriously, and that the FCO regularly raises the issue of individual death sentences with the Iranian government. Mr Hague believes it is important that international condemnation of this case is heard in Tehran, and he will continue to follow the matter closely.

However, the Conservative Party has not given any priority to the plight of Ahwazi Arabs or other national groups in Iran.

Parliament

In November 2006, Chris Bryant MP moved an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons condemning the persecution of Ahwazi Arabs and the Iranian government’s execution campaign against Ahwazi activists. The EDM was signed by 49 MPs representing the three major political parties as well as members of the Plaid Cymru and two members of the Social and Democratic Labour Party. The motion stated that this House notes the long-running persecution of the Ahwazi Arabs in the south west Khuzestan region of Iran by the authorities in Tehran; further notes that 10 Ahwazi Arabs named Ali Motairi, Abdullah Solaimani, Abdulreza Sanawati (Zergani), Ghasem

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46 Hansard, Column 244W, Answer to question 102647 by Graham Stuart, 23 November 2006 (http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm061123/text/61123w0019.htm)
Salamat, Mohamad Chaab Pour, Abdulamir Farajullah Chaab, Alireza Asakreh, Majed Alboghubais, Khalaf Khaziri and Malek Banitamim have been sentenced to death; supports Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in their complaints that Iranian justice has meant that many Ahwazi Arab defendants have had no opportunity to meet their lawyers before their case has begun, have had one-day trials in secret with no witnesses and have had false confessions extracted through torture; and calls on the Iranian Government to respect the human rights of all its peoples and to commute the death penalty in these cases.47

Members of Parliament have failed to follow up on the executions, which were carried out in December 2006 and January 2007, despite appeals by Ahwazi groups and condemnation from the European Presidency and UN Special Rapporteurs.

**European Union**

**European Parliament**
In the European Parliament, Portuguese Socialist MEP Paulo Casaca and British Green MEP Caroline Lucas have helped promote the Ahwazi rights issue with a great deal of success. Both MEPs have condemned the Iranian government’s land confiscation programme as “ethnic cleansing.”

In November 2006, the European Parliament condemned the imminent execution of Ahwazi Arabs by the Iranian regime in a motion supported by all political groups. The motion highlighted the Iranian regime’s discrimination against ethnic minorities, particularly the Ahwazi Arabs who are being displaced from their villages according to statements by Miloon Kothari, UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, while some of them remain in detention or have been sentenced to death … [and] condemns the current disrespect of minority rights and demands that minorities be allowed to exercise all rights granted by the Iranian Constitution and international law. [It] calls upon the authorities to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religious or ethnic grounds or against persons belonging to minorities, such as Kurds, Azeris, Arabs and Baluchis.48

The motion also called on the Iranian authorities to immediately halt the imminent execution of the Arabs Abdullah Suleymani, Abdulreza Sanawati Zergani, Qasem Salamat, Mohammad Jaab Pour, Abdulamir Farjallah Jaab, Alireza Asakreh, Majed Alboghubais, Khalaf Derhab Khudayrawi, Malek Banitamim, Sa’id Saki and Abdullah Al-Mansouri.

**European Presidency**
In February 2007, the German leadership of the European Presidency condemned the Iranian government’s execution campaign against Ahwazi Arabs

The European Union deplores the execution of four Ahwazi Arab men on 24 January sentenced to death in Iran for alleged involvement in terrorist activities in the Ahwaz region.

The EU has raised with the Iranian authorities its concerns about the conduct of the trial that led to these sentences and the defendants' lack of access to lawyers.

The EU calls on Iran to halt the executions of the remaining three men, to allow these

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men a fair and public hearing, and to ensure full openness and transparency in all court proceedings. The EU reiterates its longstanding opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances.  

**European Commission**

European Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner has recognized that Ahwazi Arabs are discriminated against, but her position on discrimination is unclear. She has appeared to endorse the Iranian government’s claim that Ahwazi rights activists were terrorists, but has criticised the way in which trials are conducted. However, the only ‘evidence’ the Iranian government has presented to substantiate its charges against Ahwazi Arabs has been forced confessions shown on television – an act the European Commission has failed to condemn. The Commission has also failed to condemn the use of the death penalty against Ahwazi activists.

Unlike the European Parliament and the Presidency, the Commission appears to give the Iranian government the benefit of the doubt. Moreover, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner refers to Ahwazi Arabs as “Arab-speaking Iranians”, a term that Ahwazis consider deeply insulting as it demotes them to a linguistic minority rather than an ethnic group in their own right. It is therefore highly likely that the Commissioner is being briefed by Iranian nationalists, either connected to the Iranian government or Persian chauvinists within the monarchist opposition.

In reference to the death penalty against Ahwazi activists following trials that were condemned by human rights groups, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner stated that

> The Commission is aware of the case, which we are following very closely. These persons have been convicted in connection with their involvement in bombings in the city of Ahwaz, in October 2005. The EU is looking into the possibility to intervene, formally or informally.

In collaboration with our EU partners and their diplomatic missions in Tehran, the Commission is monitoring as closely as possible the situation in the Khuzestan province of Iran. Arab-speaking Iranian citizens do indeed suffer from discrimination.

The European Commission has defended the Iranian regime against accusations of ethnic cleansing and speaks of the Ahwazi issue in terms of combating terrorism, thereby repeating Tehran’s line that the Ahwazis are a security problem rather than a human rights issue. The Commission goes further by implying Ahwazis were responsible for bomb attacks in Tehran, a charge not made by the government itself. Ferrero-Waldner states that

> We have growing concerns regarding the situation of human rights in Iran and, notably, on the excessive use of force to suppress unrest in the provinces [sic] of Khuzestan.

However, the Commission does not find it appropriate to refer to such incidents as “ethnic cleansing.” Indeed, this term should be used with caution and only when supported by substantive evidence.

Lastly, as the European Union pursues the principled policy of denouncing terrorism whatever the motives and circumstances, without exception, it is indeed appropriate to refer to the “terrorist actions” in connection with the bomb blasts which killed several

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51 Letter from Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner to Dr Caroline Lucas MEP, 29 November 2006
United Nations

General Assembly

In December 2006, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted in favour of a resolution proposed by the Canadian government which criticised Iran's appalling human rights record and its treatment of ethnic minorities.

The motion (A/C.3/61/L.41), which received the support of 70 governments, criticized the "increasing discrimination and other human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities" and called on Iran to eliminate discrimination based on religious, ethnic or linguistic grounds. The General Assembly encouraged the UN Human Rights Council and various Special Rapporteurs to pursue their work regarding Iran, and for the Assembly to continue its examination of the situation at its sixty-second session. However, the motion made no specific mention of the persecution of Ahwazi Arabs.

The Iranian government reacted angrily to the international community's condemnation of its human rights record, with its representative calling the motion "another politically motivated exercise pursued by the Government of Canada to serve its narrow political purposes and interests," although he did not identify what those interests were. Rather than address the General Assembly's concerns, the Iranian representative alleged that Canada had "a questionable human rights record, particularly concerning indigenous peoples." He added that "the draft consisted of baseless accusations and unfounded claims, and the situation it described in Iran was predicated on the sponsor's illusions and fantasies." Signalling the government's defiance, Iran's UN representative claimed that criticism of the country's human rights violations "could diminish prospects for cooperation and understanding on human rights."

UN Human Rights Commission

Special Rapporteurs for the UNHRC have frequently condemned the use of torture and land confiscation against Ahwazi Arabs and have condemned unfair trials.

In February 2007, Philip Alston, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Leandro Despouy, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, and Manfred Nowak, the Special Rapporteur on torture, issued a joint statement urging the Iranian Government to "stop the imminent execution of seven men belonging to the Ahwazi Arab minority and grant them a fair and public hearing."

In their statement, they called the attention of the international community to the case of ten men who were sentenced to death after a secret trial before a court in the Western Iranian province of Khuzestan. Their lawyers were not allowed to see the defendants prior to their trial, and were given access to the prosecution case only hours before the start of the trial. The lawyers were also intimidated by charges of "threatening national security" being brought against them. The convictions were reportedly based on confessions extorted under torture. "The only element of the cases of these men not shrouded in secrecy was the broadcast on public television of their so-called confessions", Mr. Nowak said.

The three experts indicated that in August and November 2006 they had sent two letters to the Government of Iran, bringing the allegations of unfair trial and torture to their attention and seeking clarification from the Government. No reply to these letters

52 Letter from Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner to Paulo Casaca MEP, 13 December 2005
was ever received. Instead, three of the ten men were executed in mid-December with no regard for the strong concerns expressed on behalf of the UN Human Rights Council. On Monday, January 8th, 2007, the authorities in Ahwaz, the capital of Khuzestan province, informed the families of the remaining seven men that they would be executed within the next few days.

"We are fully aware that these men are accused of serious crimes, including having tried to overthrow the Government after having received military training by US and UK forces", the UN experts said. "However, this cannot justify their conviction and execution after trials that made a mockery of due process requirements." […]

The Government of Iran systematically refuses to provide information and engage in a dialogue on these matters with the independent experts, violating its obligations under the procedures of the Human Rights Council. […]

In their correspondence with the Government of Iran, the UN independent experts also expressed their concerns about the charges of "mohareb", which according to the reports published in the Iranian media triggered the application of the death penalty in these cases. "Mohareb" can be translated as "being at war with God" and is a charge typically waged by the Iranian prosecutors against political dissidents, critics of the Government and persons accused of espionage. This charge carries with it the risk of being too vague to satisfy the very strict standards of legality set by international human rights law for the imposition and execution of the death penalty. […]\(^{54}\)

Despite the UN General Assembly’s clear condemnation of the treatment of non-Persian national groups and the condemnation by UN Special Rapporteurs of the treatment of Ahwazi Arabs, in March 2007 the UNHRC voted to abandon its monitoring of human rights in Iran. The decision prompted strong criticism from Human Rights Watch. Peggy Hicks, HRW’s global advocacy director, accused the Council of an utter disregard for the human rights activists who are struggling in these countries [...] The Human Rights Council decision sends exactly the wrong signals to abusive governments around the world.\(^{55}\)

HRW blames the decision on states that have "consistently aimed to shield abusive governments from criticism" as well as "virtually the entire Africa group" in the UNHRC. Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Switzerland, Japan and South Korea had also abstained from the vote on discontinuing monitoring of Iranian human rights abuses.

\(^{54}\) UNHCR Press Release, 10 January 2007 (http://www.unhchr.ch/huricane/huricane.nsf/0/31A0C4FE25DC547EC125725F005D3DDA?opendocument)

Appendix 1: Abtahi letter

Letter from Vice-President Sayed Mohammad-Ali Abtahi to government departments on the procedure to change the ethnic composition of Khuzestan (Al-Ahwaz) and eradicate Arab language and culture in the province. A former member of President Khatami’s staff has verified this letter as authentic.
Translation

Emblem of the Islamic Republic
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
Office of the President
Head of the Executive Office

Number Date Attachment 5/316/20675 (hand written)

TOP SECRET
In the Name of Allah

Head of the respectful Department of planning and budget- Mr. Dr. Najafi

With greetings:
Pursuant to the policies set forth, and the legislation approved by the National Security Council, with regards to changing the population demography of Arabs of Khuzestan and their appropriate resettlement to other parts of the country, it is necessary that the attached approved instructions be directed to all relevant subsidiary organizations for execution.

1. The Arab population of Khuzestan must be reduced to a third of the total population of Khuzestan within 10 years, with the rest of the population to be composed of Farsi-speaking residents and migrants.

2. On the resettlement of other ethnic groups, especially the Azeri (Turks) to Khuzestan province, in addition to the facilities approved under legislations # 16-32/971/5-7, dated 14/4/1376 (1998) - other arrangements have been made to facilitate this (forced resettlement) which will be announced in the future.

3. It is necessary to increase the resettlement of their (Arab) educated class to other provinces, especially to Isfahan, Tehran and Tabriz.

4. Proof of the existence of this ethnic group (Arabs) should be eradicated, including the changing of remaining (Arabic) names of cities, villages, regions and streets to Farsi names.

5. Arabic-speaking people should be used for the execution of this legislation, although the secrecy of this programme must be respected.

6. Newly approved legislation regarding the (forced) migration of (university) students, civil servants, teachers, military and security forces and farmers to other provinces, are attached.

Signature

Sayed Mohammad-Ali Abtahi
TOP SECRET 27686/62 2/5/1377
Carbon Copy:
1. Ministry of Information (Security)
2. Ministry of Interior
3. Ministry of Housing and Urban Development
4. Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance
Appendix 2: Arvand Free Zone

Map showing the extent of the Arvand Free Zone, delineated by a dashed blue line. All land located within the lines is now the property of the Arvand Free Zone Organisation. The zone runs along the left bank of the Shatt al-Arab. The two towns shown in red are Mohammerah (Khorramshahr) and Abadan.

The Arvand Free Zone stretches 30km from Abadan along the Shatt Al-Arab to the land border between Basra and Khuzestan. This is in two segments: an island and adjacent land measuring 30 square km (B) and a strip of land north of Khorramshahr measuring 25 square km (C). There is also an in-land eastern segment (A) measuring around 100 square km in area. The total land area of the Arvand Free Zone is around 155 square km and includes Arab towns and villages. At certain points, the zone is literally within a stone’s throw of Basra. See pages 8-9 for a translation of a letter from the Arvand Free Zone Organisation – the original is on pages 10-11 – outlining the plans for the zone and the land confiscation programme.

All those living within the 155 sq km zone will have their land and homes confiscated, as outlined in the plans. Although the Arvand Free Zone is being promoted as an economic development project, similar programmes carried out by the government have always included a military element. For instance, Arab villages and farmland confiscated around Jufir have recently come under the control of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which has built military installations and settlements for military families on the confiscated land. The Arvand Free Zone simply extends this military-industrial zone along the Shatt Al-Arab to Khuzestan’s land border with Iraq.
Below is a satellite photograph of Khorramshahr, with the free zone area outlined in orange. The inset picture is taken from the plans for the Arvand Free Zone. The zone is, in places, a stone’s throw from Basra, enabling easy access to Iraq.
Below is a letter issued from the Arvand Free Zone Organisation instructing local residents that their land will be confiscated. The original is followed by a translation.

[Translation]

Below is a letter issued from the Arvand Free Zone Organisation instructing local residents that their land will be confiscated. The original is followed by a translation.
Announcement of Expropriation of Land

First Round

According to letter # 1352/T-30820 dated 18/4/84 (2005) from the Council of Ministers, some of the lands and possessions of the cities of Khorramshahr, Abadan and Mino Island and the villages mentioned below fall under the national plan’s the Arvand Industrial and Commercial Free Zone.

In accordance with the law pertaining to the [compulsory] purchase and expropriation of land and real private property for the execution of public and development programs and related laws, we hereby inform those residents of aforementioned cities and villages and business premises who, according to the attached map of the development site, have land or possessions affected in whole or in part by the plan should attend the Arvand Free Zone Organisation’s office in Abadan with their documents for the purpose of undertaking the legal procedures [for land expropriation]. After the expiration of the legal period of consultation, the land expropriation will be carried out.

A. The Limits of the of Southern Land Section:

a. The eastern section includes: Lands behind the Port Authority of Abadan towards the Abadan Custom and Abadan Refinery:
   1. Lands between the Port Authority and Custom section #1 of Abadan
   2. Land between the roads bordering the Port Authority towards Abadan police station # 12.
   3. Land between the Abadan Refinery and Abadan Section # 3:

b. - Middle Section: – Braim Village – South of Abadan-Khorramshahr Boulevard, Mino...
Island and the Abadan Airport, up to the eastern bank of Karoon River – all between the new bridge of Khorramshahr and the entrance to Arvand (Shat-al-Arab-Waterway).
1. From Braim Village to Dairy Farm, between Arvand Ship Company, area # 4 of Abadan
2. Minoo Island section 6 parcel 6 of Khorramshahr.
3. Communities of Koi-e-Arya, Kohdasht, and the college of Naval science and mathematics, and the lands next to that, from areas of # 1,2,3, and section # 3 of Khorramshahr
4. The village of Albo-Nahi, parcel-1 main section # 3 in Khorramshahr.
5. Municipality of Nakhl (Towijat), Faisali Creek, Faisiliaeh, Koute-Shaykh areas # 4,5,6,7 and 8 section # 3 of Khorramshahr

c. – Western Section: Lands of western bank of Karoon River, from coastal boulevard to Shalamcheh:
1. Custom offices and facilities of port of Khorramshahr, parcels 11 and 11/1 of area #2-section 4 of Khorramshahr.
2. Left side of Shalamcheh Road, village of Eastern Doorband, Western Doorband and the village of Soarrah in between the port wall to Failye Road, parcels # 1, 3 and #9, main- Section 4 of Khorramshahr.
3. Left side of Shalamcheh Road, from the Port Authority Road and Failye Road, to village of Khain, onto Gharieh, about parcels 10, 11/1 and 11- section 4 Khorramshahr.

B. – The limits of the Middle Section:
Parts of the right side of Abadan- Khorramshahr Boulevard and the lands north of Bahmanshir River:
1. The right side of Abadan-Khorramshahr Boulevard- land adjacent to the village of Shanah unto the village of Faiazi, area # 1 of Abadan.
2. Lands of north of Bahmanshir River, anything between east of Jyan Canal unto the village of Moinkh parcel #1, section 8 of Khorramshahr.

C. – The extent of land the northern Section:
Includes the current special economic area of Khuzestan – the industrial townships of Abadan and Khorramshahr and the villages around the industrial townships:
3. The village of Zowidat and Mehrabad, parcel new 6, section 7 of Khorramshahr
4. The village of Moaf, parcel new 4-parcels old 1/256 and 1/254, section 7 of Khorramshahr.
5. The village of Khanfari, parcel new 3/2/13-parcel old 4 main- section 7 of Khorramshahr.
7. The village of Hatsheih, parcel 2-section 7 of Khorramshahr.
8. The village of Badrieh, parcel 1-section 7 of Khorramshahr.
9. The village of Marad, parcel new 5, parcel 5 - section 7 of Khorramshahr.
10. The village of East Hafar, under the parcel 4 new, parcels 3 old, section 8 of Khorramshahr.
Appendix 3: Land confiscation

The correspondence that follows is an internal communication between a high-ranking member of Iran’s Armed Forces and the Ministry of Agriculture, dated September 1995. The document reveals the internal policy discussion within the ranks of the Iranian establishment on changing the ethnic composition of Khuzestan and its Persianisation policies, which are geared towards eliminating the distinct national identities of minority groups within the country’s borders.
Islamic Republic of Iran

Headquarters of the Central Command of the Armed Forces

From: HQ Deputy for Intelligence and Operations of the Armed Forces
To: The Honorable Minister of Agriculture, Dear brother Dr. Kalantari
Subject: Letter of the Multi-Purpose Cooperative of the Devotees of Dezful

Greetings,

The attached two-page letter of the Multi-Purpose Cooperative of the devotees of Dezful, and verification and approval of the content of the letter, we hereby submit:

The Province of Khuzistan is considered one of the most strategically sensitive regions of the country and is continually subjected to the greedy eyes of the enemy.

After the ending of the imposed war and reconsideration of the territorial test plans and with regard to the invaluable war experience, very important and prominent proposals for the prevention of enemy penetration and security have been proposed by the military commanders. Thank god, all of the proposals and considerations of the military authorities that were submitted to the Supreme National Security Board were discussed, evaluated and approved.

The important point that was emphasized in the territorial test plan was the change of the mix and composition of the [Arab] population (both resident and non-resident workers) in the border areas of Khuzistan province* with the relocation and use and employment of the religious Farsi-speaking ethnic people (Persians) from the north and northeastern parts of the province to the areas which once were occupied by the B’athist heretics and were then liberated by the life devotion and braveries of the combatants. In order to induce a permanent presence, either in the form of building [settlements], villages and towns or by providing employment in the industrial and agricultural areas of Khuzestan.

I, with the full knowledge and approval of the brothers from the devotees cooperative, which we have witnessed their devotion in the imposed war front, urge you to facilitate the taking of the wanted land by this company- located in the steeps of the Meshdagh mountain- in the west of Karkheh river. Also known as Latif Chakhairy, flat land, be given to the devotees and combatants of this Company. The referenced land to be given is a land that, with the aid of these young combatants of this company and other Islamic combatants, was liberated from the hands of the Baathist.

Until we have these young men from the 7th Division of the Valie-e-Asr, that in the imposed war have encircled the enemy and now after the war are in the services, and are cooperating along with the government in the National Plan to take a step further in the development of the country, the country will be safe. Thank you.

Deputy Officer of Operations and Intelligence- General Headquarters of the Armed Forces
Brigadier General Gholamali Rasheed

* = Emphasis added by translator; underlining does not appear in original document
[ ] = bracketed words/phrases added by translator to clarify remarks made by the Brigadier
Appendix 4: Human rights reports

Amnesty International


Further information on Fear of imminent execution, AI Index: MDE 13/042/2007, 3 April 2007 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE130422007)


Four Iranian Arabs executed after unfair trials, AI Index: MDE 13/005/2007, 24 January 2007 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE130052007)


Further information on fear of torture and ill-treatment/ Medical concern/ Possible prisoners of conscience/Fear of imminent execution, AI Index: MDE 13/143/2006, 22 December 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE131432006)

Further information on Fear of imminent execution, AI Index: MDE 13/123/2006, 7 December 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE131232006)

Further information on Forcible return/Fear of torture and ill-treatment, AI Index: MDE 13/130/2006, 30 November 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE131302006)

Further information on fear of torture and ill-treatment/ Medical concern/ Possible prisoners of conscience/Fear of imminent execution, AI Index: MDE 13/127/2006, 13 November 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE131272006)


Further information on Death penalty / fear of imminent execution, AI Index: MDE 13/085/2006, 1 August 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE130852006)

Further information on Death penalty/fear of imminent execution, AI Index: MDE 13/073/2006, 29
June 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE130732006)


Fear of torture and ill-treatment/ Medical concern/ Possible prisoners of conscience, AI Index: MDE 13/042/2006, 28 April 2006 (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE130422006)


**Human Rights Watch**

Ethnic Arab Refugees Face Persecution if Returned to Iran, 5 April 2007 (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/04/05/syria15651.htm)


Retry Ethnic Arabs Condemned to Death, 26 June 2006 (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/06/26/iran13609.htm)

Reports of Ethnic Violence Suppressed, 11 May 2005 (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/05/10/iran10602.htm)

**UNHCR**

UNHCR extremely concerned for Ahwazi refugees extradited from Syria to Iran, 22 December 2006 (http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/458bb964d.html)


UNHCR condemns intimidation of refugees, 13 May 2003 (http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/3ec0dcd714.html)
**IRIN**

Ahwazis in fear after news of deportation and deaths, 11 December 2006  

Ahwazi refugees overlooked by government, 28 November 2005  

Interview with Human Rights Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing Miloon Kothari, 9 August 2005  

**Other organisations**

Further Deportations to Iran, Syrian Human Rights Committee, 19 November 2006  
(http://www.shrc.org.uk/data/aspx/d4/2914.aspx)

Appeal to Stop the Death Penalty and a Fair Process for the Cases of 9 Charged in Ahwaz, Emadeddin Baghi, President of the Committee for the Defence of Prisoners’ Rights, 19 June 2006
Additional Sources of Information

British Ahwazi Friendship Society
www.ahwaz.org.uk
info@ahwaz.org.uk

Ahwaz Studies Centre
www.ahwazstudies.org

Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation
www.ahwazhumanrights.org

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation
Ahwazi page: http://www.unpo.org/member_profile.php?id=6