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Defending Minority Rights: The Ahwazi Arabs

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Iran is a land of minorities¹. About half of the population of around 70 millions are believed to belong to ethnic or religious minorities². Despite constitutional guarantees of equality³, members of these minorities are subject to discriminatory laws and practices, including restricted access to basic amenities such as housing, water and sanitation, land and property confiscation, denial of state and para-statal employment under the *gozinesh* criteria and restrictions on social, cultural, linguistic and religious freedoms. These 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.

Much of the Arab community in Iran, which is believed to constitute between 3 and 8 per cent of the total population, lives in the oil-producing Khuzestan province in southern Iran (known as Ahwaz by the Arab community) which adjoins Iraq. Prior to 1925, although nominally part of Iranian territory, the area functioned for many years effectively as an autonomous emirate known as Arabistan, until Reza Khan reimposed central control by military force. Its name was changed to Khuzestan in 1936. Serious unrest in the province followed the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and in 1980, a group of secessionist Ahwazi Arabs entered the Iranian Embassy in London and took over 20 people hostage, one of whom they later killed. Among their demands was the release of 91 Ahwazi Arabs detained in Iran. Despite the Arab population remaining largely loyal to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the central government in Tehran has continued to view Arab Iranians with suspicion. Iranian Arabs claim this has led to discriminatory policies and unequal access to resources aimed at social development. Such discrimination has led to economic deprivation and frustration among Iranian Arabs, which has tended to spill over into unrest and subsequent repression, the most recent cycle of which began in April 2005 and has become known among the Ahwazi Arabs

¹ Amnesty International recognises that there is currently no internationally agreed definition of a minority. However, in using this term we refer to non-dominant ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, who may not necessarily be numerical minorities. Amnesty International believes that the existence of a minority is a question of fact to be determined on the basis of reasonable and objective criteria. Membership of a minority should be by choice; in the absence of other criteria, membership of a minority should be determined by self-identification

² Iran does not provide official statistics about the demographic make-up of its population.

³ Article 3(14) provides for equality of all before the law. Article 15 permits the use of "local and ethnic languages" and the teaching of "ethnic literature" in schools, while establishing Persian as the official language. Article 19 states: "All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights, and colour, race, language, and the like do not bestow any privilege".

as the Ahwazi intifada. Without measures to address the social economic and other grievances which are among the root causes of such unrest, the cycle looks set to continue.⁴

The unrest began on 15 April 2005 in the Shalang Abad (also known as Da'ira) area of central Ahvaz, where around 1000 demonstrators had reportedly assembled to protest at the contents of a letter, reports of which began to circulate on 9 April, allegedly written in 1999 by an advisor in the office of President Khatami. The letter, whose authenticity has been strongly denied by the author and other governmental sources, sets out policies for the reduction of the Arab population of the province of Khuzestan, including their transfer to other regions of Iran; the transfer of non-Arabs, including Persians and Turkic-speaking Azeris to the province; and the elimination of Arab place names along with their replacement by Persian names.⁵ Scores of Iranian Arabs were killed, hundreds were injured and hundreds more were detained during and following these demonstrations, during which the security forces appear to have used excessive force in their policing resulting in unlawful killings, including possible extra-judicial executions. It is feared that many of those detained may have been tortured or ill-treated.

Since then, the cycle of violence has intensified in the province. Scores of Iranian Arabs were arrested following four pre-election bomb blasts in Ahvaz and two others in Tehran in June 2005 which killed up to 10 and injured at least 90 people. Other bombs in October 2005 and January 2006 killed at least 12 people and were followed by waves of arrests. Arrests have also followed demonstrations on occasions such as the Muslim festivals of 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha. Amnesty International has received the names of around 500 Iranian Arabs detained since April 2005, some repeatedly, although the true number of detainees is likely to be much higher. Women and children have been among those detained, apparently held as hostages to force their husbands and fathers to give themselves up to the authorities. Seven men said to have been convicted of involvement in the October bombings were among nine men shown "confessing" on Khuzestan Provincial TV on 1 March 2006. Among them were Mehdi Nawaseri and Ali Awdeh Afrawi, who were hanged in public the following morning. At least 11 other men have reportedly been sentenced to death in connection with the bombings, and others have been sentenced to long prison terms and internal exile after unfair trials before Revolutionary Courts.

Amnesty International recognizes that there have been acts of violence in Khuzestan province which have led to injuries and deaths among the civilian population. It also acknowledges that the Iranian government has a responsibility to bring to justice those who commit criminal offences. However, in carrying out this responsibility the Iranian authorities must abide by relevant international human rights law and standards.

In February 2006 Amnesty International issued a report entitled Iran: New Government fails to address dire human rights situation (AI Index MDE 13/010/2006), which documented human rights violations against Iran's minority communities and, among other recommendations, urged the Iranian authorities to take immediate steps to end any discrimination against minorities and to address the human rights violations detailed in the report.

⁴ On 3 May 2006, Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Musavi-Jazayeri, the Representative of the Supreme Leader in Khuzestan, reportedly told local television that managers and officials must attend to public needs if they are to improve the situation. He encouraged the completion of unfinished development projects and reportedly called it "the year for creating a major change in the province and taking steps toward comprehensive progress."

⁵ The text, with an English translation, can be found at <http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/images/ahwaz-khuzestan.pdf>; the supposed author's denial that he wrote the letter, along with an explanation of the contents, can be found (in Persian) at <http://www.webneveshteha.com/>.

This document aims to extend Amnesty International's campaigning to promote respect for the civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights of the Ahwazi Arab community in Iran and is intended to be used in conjunction with five appeal cases:

- Iran: 11 Iranian Arab Men facing death sentences (AI Index MDE 13/051/2006);
 - Iran: Death in Custody: The Case of Ali Batrani (AI Index MDE 13/057/2006);
 - Iran: Unfair trials of Ahwazi Arab political prisoners (AI Index MDE 13/058/2006
 - Iran: Prisoners of Conscience: Four Ahwazi Arab Women and two children (AI Index MDE 13/059/2006); and
 - Iran: Land Confiscation and Population Transfer: The Case of the Ahwazi Arabs (AI Index MDE 13/060/2006).
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