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World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Arabs

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Profile

Arabs constitute up to 4 million of the population of Iran and those residing in Khuzestan are known as 'Ahwazi Arabs'. They suffer great economic hardship as well as the repression of their language and, for those who are Sunni (whilst the Arabs of Khuzestan are largely Shi'as, those further south near Bandar Abbas are predominantly Sunni), their Sunni beliefs and practice.

Historical context

There has been trade and migration in the countries surrounding the Gulf for centuries and Arabs have long resided in Iran. An autonomous 'Arabistan/Al-Ahwaz' existed until the mid-1920s, when the centralisation processes undergone by the Pahlavi regime removed the emirate, and crowned himself the 'King of Kings.' However, Iraqi attempts during the twentieth century to foment unrest among the Arabs in Iran -- under the Pahlavi regime's as well as the Islamic Republic -- were largely unsuccessful. Like other minorities, the Islamic revolution presented an opportunity for more freedom and rights to Ahwazi Arabs, and they were overwhelmingly in support of the revolution. But as disillusionment grew with the developments of the revolution, peaceful demonstrations began. 29 May 1979, known as 'Black Wednesday' saw protests in Khorramshahr turn violent, with unarmed protesters shot. They nevertheless demonstrated their loyalty to the Islamic regime during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988.

Recent years have seen a sharp deterioration in the relationship between the Iranian government and Arabs of Khuzestan, with newspapers in Khuzestan closed, many activists detained and complaints from Sunni MPs of lack of high-level representation and anti-Sunni propaganda. In April 2005, demonstrations in a number of cities and towns in Khuzestan led to the killing of up to seven police and officials, after Iranian security forces attempted to break up massive anti-regime demonstrations. Over 30 people were killed and hundreds more injured or detained. The

demonstrations had been sparked by the leaking of contents of a disputed governmental document which allegedly planned for the reduction of the Arab dominance of the Khuzestan region by bringing in settlers of Persian and Azeri ethnicity and forcibly moving Arabs away. There were also a series of bombings, a number of which were followed by televised confessions describing alleged plots against Iran and arranged by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

That Khuzestan furnished much of Iran's wealth but received very little of it for local development was the single greatest source of grievance amongst Iranian Arabs. This antagonism has only been further enflamed by large government development projects (like the Dehkhoda sugar cane plantation) that have uprooted and displaced upwards of 200,000 to 250,000 Arabs, with compensation for confiscated land being as little as one-fortieth of market value. Perhaps more troubling is that the government has not offered jobs in these projects to local Arabs. Instead, it has planned and built new cities like Shirinshahr for non-Arabs brought to the province from places including Yazd in central Iran, an initiative with obvious implications for Abtahi's abovementioned denial.

Dozens of Ahwazi Arabs have been detained, tortured and executed since demonstrations broke out in Khuzestan province in April 2011. The year began with security round-ups in the region, leading to the arrest of at least 65 people. Twenty-seven Ahwazi Arab residents of Shush in Khuzestan were arrested because of their alleged involvement in a campaign to boycott the March parliamentary elections and expressing support for the 'Arab Spring'. In June four Ahwazi Arabs, including three brothers, were executed on charges of 'enmity against God', after having been accused of killing a law enforcement official. Family members disputed the charges. They had been arrested during demonstrations in the province of Khuzestan. In July 2012, five Ahwazi Arabs were sentenced to death and a sixth received a 20-year prison sentence. International human rights groups contested the charges and argued that they were arrested because of their connection to demonstrations in February and March 2011 ahead of the sixth anniversary of protests by Ahwazi Arabs in 2005 calling for a better life for their people.

Current issues

While Khuzestan is a rich province on account of the large-scale oil production, the area suffers from exclusion and a lack of adequate social services. The province is also beset by other problems resulting from a century of deliberate neglect and underdevelopment, including higher illiteracy, lower life expectancy and widespread unemployment. High poverty rates among Ahwazi Arabs, despite their province's production of 90 per cent of Iran's oil revenue, have fuelled resentment, as has discrimination on cultural-linguistic grounds. Some Arabs are Sunni and not allowed to practice their faith publicly, or construct a single Sunni mosque. Despite Khuzestan being one of the country's main sources of oil, economic discrimination has resulted in high rates of poverty with estimates suggesting that 90 per cent of Ahwazi Arabs in rural areas are suffering from poverty.

Discrimination in work and employment is also widespread, with reports of high level Ahwazi Arabs being systematically remove from positions in extractive industry sectors to intimidate the community. However, discriminatin also impacts on the lives of low income Ahwazi Arab workers. In May 2015, an Arab street vendor, Younes Asakere, set himself on fire outside the Khorramshahr municipality in protest as authorities had confiscated his fruit stand.

The diversion of the Karoun River, a major means of transportation in Iran flowing through Ahwaz, has had a significant impact on the community and caused massive ecological devastation in an already impoverished area, especially in the marshlands, which have been turned into saltwater fields and the land which has now been said to have become desert. Residents across

Khuzestan dependent on farming for their livelihood now struggle to get by as a result of diminishing water supplies.

Ahwaz city was rated as the most polluted city in the world by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2011 and the rate of asthma among children there has long been higher than the regional average. Life expectancy is the lowest in Iran. A critical issue is the prevalence of particles smaller than 10 micrometres (PM10), since these penetrate deep into the lungs and the bloodstream. The WHO recommends a limit of 20 micrograms of PM10 per cubic metre of air; Ahwaz city records 372 micrograms.

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