

# Ahwazi Arab Solidarity Network

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## [AHWAZ HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW 2012]

Events and issues affecting Ahwazi Arabs during 2011





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## Introduction

Produced by the Ahwazi Arab Solidarity Network, the Ahwaz Human Rights Review 2012 provides an overview of the events and issues concerning the Ahwazi Arabs over 2011, a year that saw an increase in violent repression by the Iranian regime against this ethnic group. The authorities responded to the April 2011 Ahwazi Arab uprising, which was inspired by the Arab Spring revolts across the Middle East, by using live rounds and teargas on protestors, judicial executions, mass arrests and torture. Repression was also stepped up against religious minorities, including Mandaeans and Christians. Meanwhile, the socio-economic and political conditions that are the context of the unrest have merely intensified.

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 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.

The Ahwazi Arabs have, for decades, campaigned for their national and cultural rights. Their struggle, however, has been part of the wider struggle of the Iranian people and all other ethnic and national minorities. But unfortunately their role has not been fully recognised. They actively participated in the 1979 revolution, hoping that the new regime would recognise and guarantee their legitimate rights and fulfil their aspirations. Yet, the new Islamic regime not only denied the Ahwazi Arabs and other ethnic groups their legitimate rights, but also started a campaign of killings, torture and violence against them.

The Ahwazi Arabs are determined to continue their peaceful and just struggle, alongside all Iranian peoples, until the realization of their national rights and the establishment of a democratic system in Iran based on freedom, justice and human rights.

## Acknowledgements

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## Sources

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Iran Briefing, British Ahwazi Friendship Society, Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation, Al-Arabiya, Reporters Without Borders, Persian2English, Christian Solidarity Worldwide

## 1. Arab Spring uprising in Ahwaz

The 'Arab Spring' uprisings across the Middle East coupled with the sixth anniversary of the April 2005 Ahwazi uprising led to a series of demonstrations in Ahwaz in 2011, beginning on April 15, termed the 'Day of Rage' by Ahwazi Arab activists. Demonstrations in 2005 led to the killing of at least 61 protestors, hundreds of arrests and a number of executions following secretive, flawed trials in Revolutionary Courts. The 2011 protests, attracting hundreds of peaceful Arab demonstrators, spread to other Arab-populated cities such as Hamidieh, Ma'shoor (Mahshahr), Falahiya (Shadegan), Abadan and Mohammerah (Khorramshahr), although a heavy security presence meant that the protests were isolated and kept away from urban centres. The main themes of the demonstrations were lack of socio-economic development caused by discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, housing and civil and political rights.

The Iranian regime's response to the country's indigenous Arab unrest was as swift and brutal as that of other regimes facing unrest in the Middle East. The paramilitary Bassij, armed police, plainclothes officers and intelligence agents surrounded Arab districts and conducted a number of arrests ahead of the 'Day of Rage'. Movement between neighbourhoods was restricted as government forces set up checkpoints throughout the city. Raids led to scores of arrests of Arab activists, academics and youth, although this was not enough to deter the protests. Attempts to arrest individuals in the Kut Abdullah neighbourhood of Ahwaz City led to clashes between the security forces and residents, further inflaming anti-government sentiment.

During the 'Day of Rage' and the days that followed, security forces shot protestors with live ammunition and teargas. Many of the armed officers used motorcycles. With local hospitals put under the control of security forces, many injured protestors were unwilling to seek medical treatment for fear of arrest. Mobile phone and internet connections were cut to prevent news of the unrest spreading. There were reports of several deaths, although the exact numbers are unknown. The minimum number of deaths is thought to be 12 with Amnesty International stating it had received the names of 27 dead ("Iran: Arbitrary arrests, torture and executions continue", Amnesty International, May 20, 2011).

Among the confirmed dead associated with government repression before, during and after the 'Day of Rage' were:

- Mohamed Murabi, 30, killed in Ahwaz on 16 April, 2011. The body of Mohamed Murabi was withheld from his family in an attempt to force them into blaming Ahwazi dissidents for his death, but they refused.
- Abd al-Rahman Ibn Qasem al-Badawi, 37, killed in Hamidieh on 14 April, 2011
- Basem Abiat, killed in Hamidieh on 15 April, 2011
- Reza Maghamesi, died in custody March 23, 2011
- Abdol Karim Fahd Abiat, died in Sepidar Prison, Ahwaz, on May 5, 2011
- Ahmad Riassan (aka Ja'far) Salami, died in Sepidar Prison, Ahwaz, on May 5-6, 2011
- Ejbareh Tamimi, tortured to death in Sepidar Prison, Ahwaz, in May, 2011 for allegedly providing information to Dubai-based al-Arabiya TV
- Ali Heydari (aka Taha) aged 25, executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011
- Jasem Heydari (aka Abbas) aged 23, executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011
- Naser Heydari (aka Abd al-Rahman) aged 21, executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011
- Hashem Hamidi, aged 16, executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011
- Ahmad Nawaseri (aka al-Nasiri), aged 22, executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011

- Amir Ma'avi (Ma'awi), executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011
- Amir Badavi (Badawi), executed in Ahwaz, May 5-7, 2011
- Ali Na'ami, executed in Ahwaz, May 4, 2011

The Iranian government blamed the 'Arab People's Group' (Khalq-e Arab) for the unrest and deaths, although there is no single Ahwazi Arab organisation operating with this name. At various times, it has accused Britain, Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia for fomenting discontent and arming Ahwazi dissident groups, although it has provided no proof beyond forced confessions shown on television, including its international Press TV station.

The Tabnak news agency, which is owned by former Revolutionary Guards commander and former presidential candidate Mohsen Rezaei, has launched a wide-ranging attack on the regime's perceived enemies in an uncredited editorial. The article claimed that militant Wahhabi groups were being supported by Gulf states to foment separatist unrest in the oil-rich region that forms the Ahwazi Arab homeland. It also accused the British of encouraging unrest and separatism among Ahwazi Arabs from bases in Basra, suggesting that it was being co-ordinated by the British Ahwazi Friendship Society. It also accused London-based Sheikh Mohammed Kazem al-Khaqani, son of Grand Ayatollah al-Khaqani, an Ahwazi Arab cleric who opposed the Iranian regime, of also playing a role in the unrest.

#### **Action:**

Amnesty International called for an investigation into the deaths of demonstrators and the violence between security forces and protestors, particularly the use of firearms and teargas. Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme deputy director, called the government's violent response to the protests a 'chilling attack on the right to protest' and accused it of acting in the same manner as other governments in the region who are repressing unrest. It had received reports of well over 200 arrests in the run-up to the Day of Rage, at least 30 of whom were women and five were pregnant.

Human Rights Watch urged the Iranian government to halt the use of 'excessive force' against Arab demonstrators and called for open, independent and transparent investigations into the killings as well as free access to the region for the international media and human rights organisations. It condemned Iran's 'wall of silence' and suggested that the government was trying to hide what its security forces have been doing in the region. ("Iran: Investigate Reported Killings of Demonstrators", HRW, April 29, 2011)

Nobel Peace Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi wrote to Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stating that Iranian security forces had killed more than 12 people and injured dozens. She wrote: "We have no information about the fate of the prisoners. The security forces have forced the families of the victims to remain silent.'

Reporters without Borders condemned the use of force by Iranian authorities and the ban on news coverage of government violence. It claimed both the national and international media were prevented from covering the incidents. It accused the Iranian government of hypocrisy over its defence of freedom of information about the violence taking place in neighbouring countries such as Bahrain, while imposing a complete news blackout on the deadly clashes between Ahwazi Arabs and security forces in Iran, "cutting it off from the rest of the world and denying access to both independent and state media reporters." It highlighted the cases of bloggers **Ali Badri** (author of the blog Shataljarhi) and **Ali Torofi** (author of the blog Karoniat) as well as the poets **Hamin Hairi** and **Shahid Amori**, who contribute to various media. ("Authorities ban coverage of crackdown on Arab minority protests in Khuzestan", Reporters without Borders, April 22, 2011)

## 2. Political prisoners

The April uprising has seen an upsurge in human rights violations against Ahwazi Arabs in Iran's prisons. The most common accusations brought against Ahwazi political prisoners are: reviving Arab ethnic and cultural traditions in order to undermine the integrity of Iran and converting Shias (80 per cent of Ahwazi Arabs are Shi'ite) to Sunnism to attack the Islamic Republic itself. Revolutionary Courts commonly convict political dissidents under Articles 498, 499 and 500 of the Iranian Constitution which are related to breaches of security code. Prisoners are often sentenced to death over allegations such as spying for an enemy, fighting against the Islamic Republic, mohareb (enmity with God – a charge usually levelled at anyone accused of taking up arms against the state) and mofsed-e fil-arz (corruption on Earth). Both Arab identity and Sunni beliefs are regarded by the Iranian government as existential threats to the theocratic regime.

Revolutionary Courts conduct short summary trials, 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.

Many Ahwazi activists are buried in unmarked mass graves such as the *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

The notorious Karoon and Sepidar prisons in Ahwaz City have among the worst human rights violations in Iran. There are other secret prisons in Ahwaz known as 'security detention centres'. The following section uses information researched and published by the Iran Briefing Institute ("An Investigative Report on Harsh Treatment of Ethnic Arab-Iranians Political Prisoners by IRGC", Iran Briefing, May 16 2011 – see <http://iranbriefing.net/?p=6057>). The report includes the names and sentences of 107 current and recently released political prisoners at the Karoon Prison.

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*Ahwaz City hosts some of the most notorious prisons in Iran, a country renowned for torture and extra-judicial killings. Secret security centres are used to extract false confessions. Most political prisoners are ethnic Arabs imprisoned for demanding their cultural, linguistic, civil and human rights.*

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## *Prison conditions*

### **Karoon Prison**

Karoon prison has a security and political section that holds the largest number of Ahwazi Arab political prisoners in Iran. The section is cramped with only five toilets shared by more than 300 prisoners of whom around 100 are political prisoners and the rest are dangerous gangsters and drug addicts. The section is over-capacity and many inmates are forced to live and sleep in the toilet areas and corridors. The prison is under the control of the IRGC with prison officials selected from the IRGC. There is a close relationship between Karoon Prison and secret detention facilities run by the Ministry of Intelligence.

There is a lack of access to clean water and prisoners are forced to buy drinking water from guards. Inmates suffer malnutrition caused by inadequate calorific value and no vegetables and fruit as well as food-borne diseases caused by unsanitary preparation. Medical care is insufficient and there is a shortage of medicine. There are routine incidents of physical abuse and theft by guards during inspections.

Zia Nabavi, a student activist arrested for his involvement in the Council to Defend the Right to Education and exiled from Tehran to spend 15 years in 'internal exile' in Karoon Prison, said: "In ward 6 of Karoun prison in Ahvaz, at times, I really felt like I was living on the brink of what distinguishes a human's life from an animal's. Under those conditions, nothing was more dear to me than [the existence of] a binding law that would guarantee my safety and provide me with personal boundaries for the purpose of thinking and reflecting. If anyone thinks that morals and ethics or customs could play such a role [in place of a binding law], they are entirely mistaken. I, with all my pretension of respect for democracy and intellect, was not prepared to give my friends, who were dealing with the same problems as me, the opportunity to sleep on the bed [in the prison cell] or take a shower- nor was I even ready to offer them such chances out of politeness." (Source: Persian2English, translation by Siavosh Jalili)

Solitary confinement is a regular practice to punish prisoners and extract confessions. Iran Briefing states: 'There are special cells at the Karoon prison where political prisoners are psychologically and physically tortured; they are hung upside down and beaten with batons while blindfolded and restrained.'

Visitors also complain of abusive treatment by prison officials, including undignified bodily searches. Some family members are refused access to prisoners if they wear traditional Arabic dress. Depriving prisoners of family visits and telephone calls is used as a form of punishment.

### **Ahwaz Secret Detention Centre of the Ministry of Intelligence (aka Sepah Yekkom)**

The Ahwaz Secret Detention Centre, known as Sepah Yekkom, is used to extract confessions through torture. Detention in this facility often lasts for several months and sometimes years before transfer to prison, often Karoon Prison.

The following practices are used at the secret detention facilities and elsewhere:

- Solitary confinement in cells measuring 2x2 metres.
- Prisoners are kept blindfolded and handcuffed to a chair during interrogation and torture, only released to write and sign confession documents dictated by interrogators. Refusal results in torture, including beatings and mental abuse.

- It is common for the prisoner to be restrained on an iron bed and beaten all over his body, especially the legs, with a thick cable.
- There is medical evidence from Ahwazi refugees of anal rape and beatings to the genitals, often leading to permanent injury.

### Dezfool Prison

Dezfool Prison located in Dezfool to the north of Ahwaz City, where some political prisoners have been relocated, is also regarded as suffering from extreme over-crowding and poor hygiene, according to a report by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI).

ICHRI quotes an inside source: “The conduct of Dezfool Prison authorities and prison guards is extremely barbaric and inhumane, and abuse and assault of the prisoners under any excuse is a normal act in this prison. The prisoners are treated like animals.”



In relation to the imprisonment of Saeed Saki, an Ahwazi Arab political prisoner and refugee who was illegally removed from Syria and repatriated to Iran, it states that he has “been denied the right to telephone calls and visitation.... [Once] one of the most respected and reputable political prisoners of Karoon Prison in Ahvaz, he is now housed with tens of other prisoners who are all serving time for crimes related to narcotics and robbery.

“Two people sleep on every bed, and on the floors of the rooms [and] of the hallways, prisoners, who are called ‘floor sleepers,’ sleep like books next to each other, in a way that there is no possibility of any kind of movement while sleeping. Even under these circumstances, some of the prisoners are forced to sleep in prison courtyards, and they are called ‘courtyard sleepers’.

“For a few minutes of bathing, the prisoners have to wait their turns for several days. Sickness and filth has spread everywhere in the prison and surviving this prison is hardly possible. Besides hygiene problems, insufficient suitable space, not even for the prisoners to sleep, [and] failure to separate prisoners according to their crimes, ... drug abuse and free trade of narcotics in front of prison closed-circuit cameras have created unbearable conditions in Dezfool Prison.”

ICHRI warns that prison conditions are severely damaging the physical and mental health of prisoners and says that judicial authorities have voiced their concern about over-crowding. It says that conditions in Dezfool Prison are “far more horrific and more inhumane” than Karoon Prison, demanding that Saki be returned to the political ward of Karoon Prison.

*Khalafabad (Ramshir) is a small town located to the east of Ahwaz City with a total population, including nearby villages, of 62,000, around 70% of which are Arabs.*

*Oil facilities in its jurisdiction produce 700,000b/d of crude oil, worth at least US\$26bn per annum to the Iranian government and as much as the oil output of Egypt.*

*Despite the considerable oil wealth, most of the population is living in poverty, unemployment is high, there is widespread malnutrition and access to healthcare is poor.*

*Most official positions are occupied by non-Arab citizens from other parts of Iran, encouraged to the region through incentives not available to indigenous inhabitants. Meanwhile, Arab cultural activities are severely restricted.*

### 3. Focus on Khalafabad

Throughout 2011, the Iranian government instituted a policy of harsh repression against the residents of Khalafabad, an oil-rich town whose Arab inhabitants endure high levels of poverty. The Arab Spring movement encouraged many residents to speak out against state violence. The result was a wave of arrests beginning in February, targeting the most educated Arab residents. These included the following political, civil and cultural rights activists:

**Habibollah Rashedi** (42), married, father of three. Arrested on February 28, 2011. He has a BSc in chemical engineering and used to work at the Bandar Imam Khomeini Petrochemical Company. He was elected chair of Khalafabad City Council during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. He is popular among the poor and youth in the town due to his management of the town as well as promoting Arabic poetry events and other cultural gatherings and activities. The Rashedi family is one of the earliest families in Khalafabad.



**Hadi Rashedi** (37), single. Arrested on February 28, 2011 with his brother **Habibullah Rashidi** (see above). A highly qualified post-graduate with an MSc in chemistry, he works in local high schools as a teacher. Like his brother, he has a keen interest in cultural issues and is an advocate for the poor. He suffers from heart disease and as such is exempt from military service. During his imprisonment, he has suffered considerable mental stress, developing a digestive disorder as a result. As a result of beatings, he has a fractured hip. He appeared in a documentary aired by Iran's Press TV (see <http://www.presstv.ir/Program/215617.html>) in which he was forced to confess to firing a gun at a buildings housing security and government officials in Khalafabad. He was described as a member of the 'Khalq-e Arab', although no single organisation has adopted this name.



**Rahman Asakereh** (33), married and father of five children. He has a BSc in Chemical Engineering from Khorramabad University and an MA in Social Sciences from Ahwaz University. He was in the process of editing his Master's thesis, which was focused on the



difficulties faced by bilingual students in the Iranian education system. He worked as a chemistry teacher in local high schools and conducted free courses for university entrance exams for Arab youth. He was active at a regional level in cultural and civic activities and was a student activist at the universities he attended. Rahman Asakereh's 14 year-old son **Hamed Asakereh** (pictured on right) died on September 13, 2011 after he was hit by a police car in suspicious circumstances while his father was in prison. It is suspected that Hamed was murdered to cause distress to Rahman.



**Mohammad Ali Amoori** (33), fisheries engineer originally from Ahwaz City who relocated to Khalafabad. He graduated from Isfahan University with a degree in aquaculture and natural resources. He was one of the founding editors of the student newspaper *Torath* and was also an active blogger. He taught in some of the high schools in Khalafabad. He was originally inspired into political activism by the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. He had proposed a plan to form a civic institution called *Al-Hewar* (Dialogue), but permission was denied by the Ministry of the Interior. He was later involved in the *Lejnat al-Wefaq* (Reconciliation Committee), an Arab political association that was allowed to contest elections and won a number of seats in municipal councils, including a majority on Ahwaz City Council, as well as the Ahwaz seat in the Iranian Majlis. However, the organisation was banned by the government and he was forced to flee to Iraq with **Shahid Shaabani Amouri** and **Fares Silawi** where he was arrested and detained for five years. After he was repatriated to Iran, he was arrested by the authorities.



**Shahid Shaabani Amouri** (42), originally from Ahwaz City and a resident of Khalafabad. He is a married father of three. In addition to being a well-known poet in Ahwaz, he is a civil and cultural activist and was active in Arabic poetry events. Despite being a famous poet, he has suffered poverty, homelessness and unemployment and denied employment or assistance from the government. His poetry stressed Ahwazi Arab identity and the persecution of the ethnic group, which meant he was under constant surveillance. He was active in mobilising young people in support of Mohammad Khatami's presidency. In 2006, he fled Iran, accompanying **Mohammed Ali Amouri** and **Fares Silawi** to Iraq. He was arrested in Iraq and sentenced to five years imprisonment in Al-Amarah for illegal entry. He was arrested after his deportation to Iran.



**Fares Silawi** (38), a father of eight, arrested after fleeing to Iraq with **Mohammad Ali Amoori** and **Shahid Shaabani Amouri**. He died in prison due to the prison conditions and torture. His body was returned to Iran and buried in Khalafabad.

**Mohammad Hamid** (35), journalist and Arabic translator from Ahwaz and a resident of Khalafabad. He is married and has one child. He was employed by Saudi Arabia's governmental news agency SPA in Tehran and was a civil activist supporting the presidential candidacy of Mehdi Karroubi. The government banned him from media activities on March 20, 2011. This ended his employment with SPA. Amid heightened tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, he was forced to leave Iran on March 29, 2011 and sought political asylum in Turkey.



**Ali Badri** (30), married with one child. Originally from Ahwaz City and a resident of Khalafabad. He has a BA in Accounting from Ahwaz University and has worked in Ahwaz's office of charity and endowments. He is a political, civil and human rights activists and a blogger. Raised in an educated, respected family, Ali is described as an intellectual, well-mannered person. He was arrested on April 11, 2011, released on bail and has been dismissed from his job. Ali Badri has been involved in a wide range of activities in different political and election campaigns and holds Arabic cultural events in Khalafabad.



**Hashem Shaabani** (Amoori) (31), originally from Ahwaz City and a resident of Khalafabad. He is married with one child. He has a Bachelor degree in Arabic language literature and education and holds a Masters degree in Political Sciences from Ahwaz University. He has written poetry in Arabic and Farsi and teaches Arabic language and Arabic literature in high schools. He is a cultural, civil and student activist and also a blogger. He takes care of his elderly parents. His father Khalaf Shaabani was disabled while fighting Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War. Due to their son being arrested, his parents are suffering both physically and mentally. In December 2011, he was featured on Iran's international television station Press TV (see



<http://www.presstv.ir/Program/215617.html>) in which he was forced to confess to being involved in separatist terrorism and supporting Ba'athism in Iraq. He was also made to claim that he had assistance from Hosni Mubarak and Muammer al-Qadafi, the former rulers of Egypt and Libya. Those who know him state that he has never supported armed insurgency against the Iranian state, let alone have contact with foreign governments.

**Amir Amoori** (29, single with a university diploma and brother of **Mohammad Ali Amoori**), computer technician and internet cafe owner **Aghil Aghili**, **Saeed Asadi**, **Sayed Mokhtar Alboushoukeh**, **Sayed Jaber Alboushoukeh** and **Sayed Bagher Alboushoukeh** have also been among prominent people arrested from Khalafabad.

The detained were not given reasons for their detention and have been denied legal representation. They have also been denied access to their families. As such, they are being held illegally and are at risk of physical and mental abuse and torture. In the past, those who confessed to crimes they did not commit, but acted to protect their families from harm, were subsequently executed.

## 4. Refugee issues

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, who were arrested on arrival and tortured. Ahwazi refugees also report harassment by Iranian agents in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

### *Iraq*

Iraq is a state party to both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and to the Convention against Torture (CAT), treaties which prohibit the forcible return of anyone to a country where they would be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment.

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. 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, the Iran-aligned Badr Brigades evicted Ahwazi Arabs during and after the invasion of Iraq. Most Ahwazi refugees have fled Iraq since the 2003 invasion.

Attempts to set up a UNHCR transit centre for 80 Ahwazi families in the outskirts of Basra were thwarted due to violent harassment. Ahwazi Arab refugees were expelled from camps in Basra and Amarah and children of Ahwazi Arab descent were expelled from Iraqi schools and universities by the post-Saddam regime. Persecution of Ahwazi refugees has been accompanied by a series of murders of Ahwazi dissidents in Iraq by death squads.

The Al-Waleed refugee camp in Iraq continues to be a cause for concern. The camp was created near the border with Syria close to the Al-Tanf crossing in 2006, after Palestinian, Ahwazi Arab and Kurdish refugees were displaced by Iranian-backed militias and political parties following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's

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*Ahwazi Arab refugees in the Middle East were once warmly welcomed by Syria and Iraq when the governments of these countries were hostile to Iran.*

*The changing geopolitical dynamics, with Iran emboldened following the overthrow of the Saddam regime in 2003, has led to the persecution of Ahwazi refugees. Many have been illegally repatriated to Iran where they have been arrested and often imprisoned and tortured. Others have gone into hiding or have fled the Middle East, although some have received limited assistance from the UNHCR.*

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regime by US-led forces. However, the Syrian authorities have refused them entry or asylum. While many Palestinian and Kurdish refugees have left the camp – some with the assistance of the UNHCR – at least 90 Ahwazi Arabs remain there in large part because, unlike Palestinians and Kurds, the Ahwazi community lacks a significant international lobbying force.

Among those in the camp are men, women and children. They are suffering diabolical conditions with temperatures reaching up to 50°C during the day and freezing at night and the camp is frequently battered by sand storms. There is insufficient food supply, no access to clean water, no sewer system and the nearest hospital facilities are located 200km away. The unsanitary conditions are leading to the spread of disease. Children at the camp have not received schooling since 2007. Some aid agencies have tried to assist the inhabitants, but a permanent solution is required.



Children suffering dysentery in Al-Waleed refugee camp

There were reports that the Iraqi government, following appeals from the Iranian regime and its Iraqi supporters, has ordered camp inmates to leave by the end of September. The deadline has repeatedly been extended following UNHCR appeals to the Iraqi government, but the situation is becoming more urgent due to the changing domestic situation in Iraq following the final withdrawal of US troops. The increasing influence of the Iran-aligned Shia political bloc in the Iraqi government threatens the welfare of all dissidents with Iranian citizenship and their families living in the country.

There is no possibility of a safe return to Iran, particularly given the fact that many were given asylum by the Iraqi government during the 1980s at a time when it was hostile to Iran, an ally of Western governments and sympathetic to the Ahwazi cause. Given the assassination of prominent Ahwazi leaders living in Iraq following the occupation and the attack on the human rights of Ahwazi refugees in Iraq and Syria, Ahwazi inhabitants of Al-Waleed are unsafe in the Middle East and European governments are being urged by Ahwazi groups to give them sanctuary.

**Action:**

In January 2011, Amnesty International urged Iraqi authorities to stop the forcible return to Iran of Ahwazi Arab refugees amid fears they would be at risk of torture and other serious human rights violations. The organisation's concerns focused on the cases of Ahwazi refugees detained at prisons in Basra and Al-Amara. ("Iraq urged to stop deportation of Iranian Ahwazi refugees", Amnesty International, January 14, 2011)

In September 2011, the Ahwazi Arab Solidarity Network in the UK met with Norman Lamb MP, Chief Parliamentary and Political Adviser and Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg. An appeal signed by Ahwazi groups as well as Minority Rights International and the Iranian Refugees Action Network was handed to Mr Lamb who pledged to deliver it to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation and other Ahwazi groups and sympathisers remain in contact with the UNHCR and inhabitants of the camp to advocate an improvement in conditions at the camp as well as a fast-track resettlement. A Bahraini businessman has encouraged coverage in the Gulf media, attracting some donations for resources for the camp inhabitants, but not enough to meet their needs.

### *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.

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. The UNHCR has previously accused the Syrian government of lying when it claimed it had kept UNHCR-mandated Ahwazi refugees in custody when they had, in fact, been repatriated. A number of Ahwazi refugees illegally repatriated by Syria to Iran remain in custody, including President of the Ahwazi Liberation Organisation **Faleh Abdullah al-Mansour** (65), a naturalised Dutch citizen.

Another prominent refugee is **Masoumeh Ka'abi**, the wife of leading Ahwazi dissident Habib Nabgan, a former member of the Lejnat al-Wefaq which was an Arab political party that was allowed to contest elections but was later banned. According to Amnesty International (MDE 13/071/2011), she was forcibly repatriated from Syria to Iran in September 2008 before she could be resettled to Denmark, where her husband has asylum. She is currently serving a four-and-a-half year prison sentence and is reportedly in a physically and mentally poor state with no teeth left due to frequent beatings and suffering from heart disease and depression.

There are ongoing concerns about the health and welfare of all Ahwazi refugees deported to Iran. Human rights organisations have expressed concern that the refugees are being tortured and are in danger of execution.

As a result of the deportations, many UNHCR-mandated Ahwazi refugees in Syria have fled or are in hiding, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Syria's civil unrest during 2011 has made the task of tracking refugee cases more difficult.

*Many Ahwazi Arabs depend on fishing and farming for their livelihoods. Their homelands contain the Karoon and Karkhe rivers as well as the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which has made the region abundant and fertile.*

*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 planning a river diversion project that would see local waters redirected to dry areas of Iran, such as the ethnically Persian provinces of Yazd and Rafsanjan. The policy has met with strong opposition from the local population since it was first proposed some 10 years ago.*

*Ahwaz City and the surrounding region have the highest air pollution levels in the world due in large part to unregulated industries. This is having a serious effect on local inhabitants.*

## 5. Environment

### *Industrial pollution*

High levels of industrial pollutants threaten major ecological disaster, which will inevitably impact on the welfare of local inhabitants leading to further impoverishment of indigenous Arabs.

In 2011, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that Ahwaz City was the most polluted place in the world. The city has an annual average of 372mcg of suspended particles per cubic metre, a third more than the world's second most polluted city, Ulan Bator in Mongolia, with 279mcg. As a result, asthma and other respiratory problems are epidemic in Ahwaz. According to a study on asthma prevalence in Ahwaz that was published in the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal in 2010, the prevalence of ever asthma was significantly higher among 13-14 year-olds (9.8%) than 6-7 year-olds (6.8%). Ahwaz's ever asthma rates are far higher than the mean prevalence of 5.8% in the Middle East and other parts of Iran, such as Tehran (2.2% of 6-7 year-olds and 2.6% of 13-14 year-olds).

In most of the province's towns and cities, water is polluted with industrial waste and emissions from industries have led to respiratory problems among the local population. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Karoon has faced more than 400 incidents of serious contamination.

Disruptions to water supplies force many Ahwazi Arabs to rely on contaminated water from the Karoon, which contains high levels of human sewage and industrial pollutants. The chemical and petrochemical industry is the largest polluter of the Karoon. Other major polluters are industries producing metals, minerals, refined sugar and paper pulp.

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.

The Bandar Imam petrochemical complex 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 is seriously affected by pollution from mercury and other dangerous substances. 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.

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.

Rapid development and industrialization in particular, pollution, over-fishing, dam building, aquaculture, breeding and introduction of non-indigenous species of fish has led 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 fish. They include *Barbus tetrazona* and *Barbus oligolepis* which were formerly seen in abundance in the river.'

#### *River diversion*

The Iranian government is carrying out a project to divert water from the Ahwazi Arab homeland to dry provinces such as Rafsanjan and Yazd. The Behesht Abad water transfer project would divert more than 1bn cubic metres from Karoon river to Isfahan, Kerman and Yazd provinces for drinking water as well as agriculture and industrial purposes.

In an address to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, tenth Session, New York, May, 17-27 2011, Karim Abdian, Director of the Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation, claimed that the diversion of waters from the Karoon and Karkhe rivers from Arab lands to ethnically Persian provinces of Isfahan, Yazd and Kerman represented a further erosion of Ahwazi Arab farmers' economic security. He claimed it was in line with a policy of ethnic cleansing and land confiscation against indigenous Arab populations pursued by successive Persian-dominated regimes in Iran.

The diversion project is also highly controversial with Khuzestan's normally compliant Majlis members, including hardliner Nasser Soudani, threatening in 2011 to resign en masse if the project is carried out. In September 2011, Soudani was reported as saying that the diversion of the Karoon would have a negative impact on agriculture, tourism, aquaculture and the natural environment. He added that the project would increase the volume of dust in the air and exacerbate water pollution as well as threaten agro-industrial enterprises, such as sugar cultivation and refining. The governors of Khuzestan, Chahar Mahaal va Bakhtiari and Lorestan are also reportedly opposed to the project. The project was due to start in 2011, but as a result of the protests the project was postponed.

The government has previously rejected the United Nations 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. It claimed it 'will not damage any part of the country and will not reduce the quota of water of any province.' It insists that the region would benefit from hydroelectric power stations that form part of the river diversion project.

**Action:**

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.

## 6. Religious minorities

### Mandeans



Discrimination against the Mandaean faith forced more than 300 Mandaean families to leave their homeland in 2011. Mandeans, also known as Sabians, have lived in the region for nearly 2,000 years and are traditionally employed as goldsmiths. Based on Gnosticism and the teachings of John the Baptist, the peace-loving members of this ancient faith perform regular ritual baptisms which are traditionally carried out in the rivers. Many regard themselves as Arabs or otherwise identify themselves more closely with Arabs than other ethnic groups in Iran. Their graves are desecrated by the regime and they are subject to extreme discrimination under the *gozinesh* criteria. Unlike Zoroastrians and Jews who number around 40,000 each, Mandeans have no allocated seat in the Iranian Majlis although they number 60,000-100,000.

In an interview with Al-Arabiya published in December 2011, Ahwazi Mandaean Enaam Hamed said: "I used to work as an Arabic language teacher in Khuzestan and I know how instilling this hatred starts from school curricula. Everything Arab is condemned; our community was part of the Arab community in Khuzestan and its capital Ahwaz." Hamed complained that Mandeans suffer persecution because they are identified as ethnically Arab as well as members of an unrecognised minority faith.

### Christians

Christian worship in Ahwaz has also been treated as a threat to national security. Immediately before Christmas 2011, the Iranian authorities raided an established church affiliated to Assemblies of God. Most members of the church were formerly Mandeans who converted to Christianity. All worshippers were detained, including children attending the Sunday school, and interrogated. The senior pastor, his wife and some church leaders were held in custody.

*The Ahwazi Arab homeland has tended to be highly tolerant of its religious diversity. Although Shi'ites form the largest religious group in the region, there are significant minorities of Sunnis, Mandeans and Christians. The region was also a pilgrim centre for Jews visiting the shrine of the prophet Daniel in Shoosh (Susa). These various faiths were an integral part of the fabric of society in the region.*

*The establishment of the Islamic Republic has led to the persecution of minorities in the region with Sunni mosques effectively prohibited, a ban on the proselytisation of non-Shia beliefs and even alternative voices within Shi'ism repressed, particularly those who advocate secularism.*