

Al-Ahwaz Environment Report 2013



A report on the environmental crisis in the Al-Ahwaz region

AHWAZI ARAB SOLIDARITY NETWORK
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ABOUT AHWAZI ARABS

Residing mainly in the Al-Ahwaz region in the south-west of Iran, the Ahwazi Arabs are one of the Middle East's most disadvantaged and persecuted ethnic groups.

Millions of Ahwazi Arabs live in Iran's Khuzestan province, which occupies a geostrategically 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, 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 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.

Ahwazi Arabs actively participated in the 1979 revolution, hoping that the new regime would recognise and guarantee their legitimate rights and fulfil their aspirations. Yet, the Islamic regime not only denied the Ahwazi Arabs and other ethnic groups their legitimate rights, but also started a campaign of killings, torture against them.

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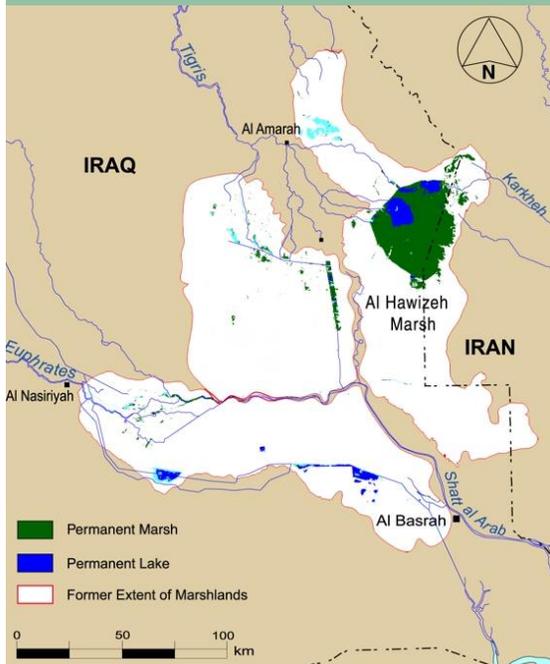
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Indigenous Ahwazi Arabs are being adversely affected by the environmental consequences of the Iranian government's controversial river diversion programme, intensive sugar cane farming and industrial pollution, which are all the products of the government's misguided economic development policies. Droughts that were once easily overcome are now exacerbated by man-made water shortages. Meanwhile, industry persists in its reckless pursuit of growth, regardless of the human effects. Asthma rates have soared by in the region over the past decade and Ahwaz City is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as having the world's worst air pollution.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has officially warned the Iranian Environment Association that the southwest of Iran is facing a situation similar to the environmental catastrophes that have affected the Aral Sea in Central Asia and the Amazon jungle. The region contains extensive marshes and rivers that support endangered species of fish as well as migratory birds. Ahwazi farmers and fishermen also depend on the waters for their livelihoods.

Overview of the river diversion programme

Great controversy surrounds the river diversion programme. The government's plans, already under development, seek to siphon off 1.1bn cubic metres of water from the province's main rivers to central Iran. Majlis member for Ahwaz Sayed Sharif Hosseini, who leads the 18-strong Khuzestan parliamentary delegation, was one of many who sought to bring wider attention to the issue of drought and water management in September 2012. He said: "Khuzestan used to have a third of the country's water resources with five major rivers. Today we are facing a disaster in terms of shortage of clean water and water for agriculture." This has reduced the area covered by farming as well as crop yields and quality. The situation has been worsened by the government's refusal to provide chemical fertilisers to farmers, he claimed. Hosseini has previously protested against the diversion of the Karoon River, warning it would mark the "death of Khuzestan."



Impact on marshlands

Waste water from industry and cash crop production is a major threat to the region's ecologically valuable marshlands, which serve as an important habitat for wildlife as well as helping to regulate humidity and rainfall further inland. The Hawr Al-Azim marsh, which connects to Iraq's Hawr Al-Hawizeh marsh, is under threat from water pollution and the construction of dams on the Karkeh River which feeds it. The extent of the marsh has declined dramatically over the past three decades with disastrous consequences for the wildlife and communities that depend on it.

According to UNEP, the Hawr al-Azim 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 extent of the marsh declined 53.7% to 295.6 square km between 1975 and 2000 with the area covered by permanent marsh falling 52.5%, permanent lakes shrinking 67.0% and seasonal and shallow lakes declining 98.0%. Some species, such as otters, have reportedly vanished from the marsh as a result. The situation since 2000 has continued to worsen with increased salinity, putrefaction of vegetation and widespread desertification.

Ignoring warnings of environment experts, in October 2012 the Head of the Environment Protection Agency Mohammadi Zadeh approved the discharge of waste water from sugarcane plantations into the marshlands of Khuzestan. He claimed that the release of waste water would have no effect on the marshlands. However, leading experts in the region disagreed, stating that plantation effluent combined with dam construction and lower rainfall threaten a devastating ecological crisis in the marshes.

Academics and conservationists have repeatedly warned that discharging saline waste water into freshwater lagoons will have catastrophic effects on the ecosystem and the indigenous Arabs who have lived there since ancient times. Dr Mehran Afkhami, a professor at the University of Tehran, said that fauna that evolved over thousands of years in the fresh water conditions of the marshes face extinction due to salination caused by waste water. He stated that the discharge of sugarcane waters with a salinity of $10,000\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ into a freshwater wetland would lead to the failure of the ecosystem.

Impact on agriculture

The impact of the water diversion project may have had a role in the massive decline in the production of wheat, a source of animal feed. Iran has this year faced escalating costs for chicken, a major source of protein in the national diet, due to animal feed shortages. This prompted protests throughout Iran during Ramadan in 2012. Khuzestan is Iran's second largest wheat-producing province. Around 62% of the province's wheat production is reliant on irrigation, utilising water from its rivers. Wheat production has declined by up to half in 2012, due primarily to water shortages as state water suppliers prioritised cash crops.

In October 2012, Mehr News reported that the drying of the Karkheh river, the Hamidyeh district's source of irrigation water, destroyed around 17,000ha of crops as the government diverted river waters from the Arab populated Al-Ahwaz region to cash crop production in Persian-majority provinces elsewhere in Iran. Grain, poultry and fish farming in Hamidyeh have all been hit by low river water flow, which is also causing a shortage of drinking water. The cost has been both environmental and economic, with many Arab farmers left without a livelihood and high levels of personal debt. Many are migrating to the cities for work. The once fertile land of Hamidyeh city is now threatened with permanent desertification.

Impact on wildlife and human health

In most of the province's towns and cities, water is polluted with industrial wastes and open sewers run through the middle of the streets. Emissions from industries cause severe 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, industrialisation is a lose-lose situation.

Research has found that a large area of Khuzestan (Ahwaz) is seriously affected by pollution from mercury and other dangerous chemicals used in petrochemicals manufacturing. Birds from the falcon family, at the top of the food chain, contained 2mg per kg of body weight, according to government scientists – 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. Over the past decade, Ahwazi Arab fishermen have reported outbreaks of disease among fish and a sharp decline in catches, indicating that Iran's mismanagement of water resources has devastated river life. Fish containing high levels of heavy metals are causing development disorders and disease among Ahwazi Arabs, according to a number of recent studies.

The main sources of heavy metals such as lead, aluminium, mercury, copper, cadmium, nickel and arsenic in the environment are sewerage and industrial waste. Consumption of fish, the main source of protein for many Ahwazis, living in the heavily polluted rivers of Al-Ahwaz is affecting embryo growth and causing a number of other neurological disorders as well as cancers.

Impact on Iraq

The demise of the region's rivers has also had a negative impact on Iraq. A US study in 2009 noted that water flows from Iran to Iraq had fallen dramatically. Around 30 per cent of the Tigris river's water originates from Iran with the bulk of water coming from melt water from the Zagros mountains.

It notes: "In Basra province, low river water flows from Karkh River blockages and Karun River diversions have allowed the Arabian Gulf to intrude up to 60 kilometers north of the mouth of the Shatt Al Arab. This highly saline water pollutes water treatment plant intakes and irrigation canals and has interfered with at least one petrochemical plant.

"Karkh River blockage has also had a devastating effect on the Iraqi side of the Al Huwaza Marsh. Flow that used to exit the Al Huwaza Marsh from the south side and join the Tigris River is nonexistent, and only patches of small stagnant pools of water can be seen from the air ...

"Humanitarian efforts are ongoing in Basra Province to counteract the effects of diminished and ineffective water treatment capabilities due to the high salinity concentrations."

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