

AHWAZI AND THE DIVERSION OF THE KAROON RIVER

Al-Ahwaz, also known as Arabistan or Khuzestan, is situated in the southwestern part of Iran. Nearly 90% of Iran's oil originates from Al-Ahwaz, due to its location at the tip of the Gulf and the Shat al-Arab waterway. However, despite the rich oil reserves, the indigenous population of the area, known as the Ahwazis, are marginalized by the Iranian government and have faced increasingly harsh treatment. Ahwazi Arabs have had their lands taken away by the Iranian government and given to ethnic Persians. The Ahwazis have not received any compensation for the loss of their lands and instead have been forced to move into shanty towns in the outskirts of the regional capital, Ahwaz.



One of the greatest threats to the Ahwazi people have been the diversion of the Karoon River by the Iranian government. 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. In January 2006, local members of parliament threatened to resign their seats in protest at the diversion of the Karoon. They claimed that it would seriously undermine water security and the livelihoods of many farmers in the Arab-majority province. In December 2005, some Khuzestan MPs launched a petition to impeach Energy Minister Parviz Fatah over the project.

Nevertheless, in June 2007, Fatah rejected the United Nations Environment Program'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 program, 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.

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. Iran's current project of transferring the waters of the Karoun River to decertified Iranian provinces will have major consequences for the marshland, according to environmental activists. 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.

WATER DIVERSION

