

**An open letter from the Ahwazi-Arabs for Freedom and Democracy in Iran
to Mr. Maurice Copithorne, Special Representative of the Office of the United
Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.**

October 2002

Dear Sir:

We are writing this letter to you as members of the **Ahwazi-Arabs for Freedom and Democracy in Iran**, an organization founded in America to raise awareness regarding the plight of Iran's significant and oppressed Arab minority. It has come to our attention that in your report to the **United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR)** on the situation of human rights in Iran, you did not make any reference to the Ahwazi Arabs of Khuzistan, a province in the southwestern part of Iran (hereto referred to as Arabs of Iran, Iranian Arabs, Arabistanis or Ahwazi Arabs, interchangeably). (We are referencing Section F, part VII, Ethnic Minorities in the report you submitted in January 2002 to the members of the UN General Assembly).

The Iranian Arab national minority population is about five million, the majority of which live in the southwestern province of Khuzistan (Arabistan), bordering Iraq. We, the Ahwazi Arabs of Iran, this oppressed and ill-treated national minority, are being denied our basic human rights. These rights include our ability to study our native language, our right to speak our native language, and our right to exercise our culture and our customs. We seek our cultural and linguistic rights in accordance with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We look upon the UN, and UNHCHR in particular, to raise our stifled voices to the international community. UNHCHR is one of our remaining hopes. The consistent denial of our rights and our Arab identity by the Iranian regime will further increase tensions within Iran and may lead to "Balkanization" and further bloodshed if the UN and the rest of the international community continue to disregard our plight.

Our demands and call for our basic human rights, including education in our mother tongue, have often been labeled as "nationalistic", "separatist", and "secessionist" by the Iranian regime. They see our calls for cultural rights as "disintegration tendencies" and as "threatening Iran's national security".

The fact is that we seek peaceful coexistence with other national ethnic and religious groups in Iran. However, we demand more autonomy and self-rule for the Arabistani population of Iran. We are not seeking to secede from Iran or engage in a violent confrontation.

National and ethnic distinctions are strong in Iran among the non-Persian peoples that comprise about 60% of the total population. The breakdown is estimated to be as follows:

Azeri and non-Azeri Turks 36% or 25 million, Kurds 10% or 7 million, Arabs 7% or 5 million, Baluch 3% or 2 million, Turkomans 2% or 1.5 million, Armenian, Assyrians, Jews and other national and religious minorities between 1-2 million.

Slight progress has been made in the realm of minority rights in Iran. Minority peoples may now publicly discuss ethnic and national minority issues and some Azeri and Kurdish radio and TV channels have emerged, in addition to some weekly and monthly publications in their native languages. The number of Azeri (Turkish) newspapers that are demanding their national rights in Iran during the era of Khatami has jumped to more than twenty, and the Kurdish newspapers to more than ten.

However, these minor freedoms have not been afforded to the Iranian Arabs. Since 1995, there have been over thirty official requests to the Iranian Ministry of Education and Guidance to obtain licenses for the establishment of Arabic newspapers in Ahwazi Territory. All have been denied.

For the first time in the history of Iran since 1925, the government allowed a short-lived paper to be published erratically by the Arabs, half in Farsi and half in Arabic, in order to express their economic, cultural, and social suffering. It is currently banned or under severe pressure to cease publication.

Numerous times in the past several years, we have appealed to the Iranian government to clean land mines remaining from the eight year Iran-Iraq war that were planted throughout Khuzistan. These mines still threaten the lives of Arab inhabitants on a daily basis. Every day we hear of children being blown apart by land mines, especially in the frontier areas around the Abadan and Mohammarah (Khuramshahr) regions.

The Khuzistan Governor-general and all other high-level government officials have consistently been appointed from outside of the native Arab population, which demonstrates the government's lack of attention to Arab public opinion in the province.

While most Arabistanis are Shi'ite, some are Sunni Muslim as well. Sunni Arabs, as well as Shiite Arabs, have been systematically arrested, imprisoned and tortured for voicing their opinions. Some of them currently live in the U.S., Europe, and Canada; they are willing to come to UNHCHR to testify before you and any other relevant UN forums.

Prior to 1925, Arabistan (Khuzistan) enjoyed a large measure of autonomy and freedom. By enforcing centralization in 1930, the state adopted the Persian (Farsi) language, which is spoken by less than 45% of Iran's population. As previously stated, the government also banned Arabic education in the province of Arabistan (Khuzistan), where about 90% of the people were native Arabic speakers.

As you noted in your report, after the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Arab Iranians in the Khuzistan province, like other minorities, sought autonomy and the right to self-determination. The regime's response was heavy-handed and swift. Arab cultural and political organizations were decimated by Admiral Dr. Ahmad Madani, the first governor of Khuzistan after the 1979 revolution, leaving over 300 dead and over 500 injured in the streets of Khuramshahr (Mohammarah) in September of 1979.

Although the Islamic Republic is marginally more tolerant of the national minorities than the previous monarchist regime of Pahlavi in allowing some public forums, seminars and conferences of writers, poets and artists in Azeri and Kurdish areas, it has resisted and consistently denied our requests for the same in the Khuzistan province with the majority Arab population.

Here are some historical highlights about Arabistan (Al-Ahwaz) or Khuzistan:

- In 4000 B.C. the Al-Ahwaz territory witnessed the birth of one of the oldest civilizations called the Eilam Semitic civilization.
- In 1436 C.E. the Arab Msha'sha'ya state was formed under the leadership of Mohammad Ibn Fallah. It lasted for about three centuries, located between the Persian and Ottoman empires. The Msha'sha'ya dynasty was able at certain times to control large parts of Iran including Bandar Abbas, Kermanshah, and territories in Iraq including Basra and Waset, in addition to Ihsaa and Qateef.
- In 1837 the Ottoman Turkish forces invaded the port and provincial city of Mohammara and occupied it, later conquering all of Arabistan.
- In 1857 Nasser Din Shah Qajar, then king of Persia, acknowledged the independence of Mohammarah City (currently called Khuramshahr) as an emirate that has a government and laws of its own.
- In 1897 Prince Maz'al Ibn Jaber El Ka'bi, ruler of Arabistan was assassinated and his brother prince Khaz'al ruled after him. Khaz'al allied himself with Britain to keep his emirate free from the Iranian and Turkish governments. He played a very significant role in the events of the first quarter of the 20th century.
- In 1907 Britain and Russia made a treaty by which they divided Iran into three territories: British, Russian and neutral. The territories of Arabistan were excluded, as they were considered a semi-independent group of Arab emirates.
- In 1917 the success of the revolution in Russia led the Western countries, especially Britain, to change their strategies in the area. The West began withholding its support of Arabistan for the sake of maintaining a united Iranian bloc that would serve as a more effective barrier in the face of the Russian Bolsheviks.
- In 1924 Khaz'al announced his rebellion against Reza Khan (Reza Shah Pahlavi). He stated his case to the League of Nations, but his efforts were a failure due to the British switch of protection to Reza Shah.
- In 1925 Reza Shah used deception when he failed to achieve a military victory over Prince Khaz'al. He kidnapped Sheikh Khazal, imprisoned and later killed him in Tehran. Reza Khan imposed his control over Arabistan with the help of Britain, the "ally" of Arabistan. Thus the Iranian government was able to put an end to the last

autonomous province and emirate in the area and bring Arabistan (Al-Ahwaz) under its control. In 1936 Reza Shah changed the name of Arabistan to Khuzistan, after over five centuries.

- After the fall of the Shah and the triumph of the Islamic revolution in 1979, the Iranian Arab people of Khuzistan, especially the petroleum workers who went on strike to hasten the downfall of the Shah, played a prominent role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Nonetheless, a few short months following the successful revolution, the relationship between Ahwazi Arabs and the new revolutionary regime was fraught with confrontation. The confrontation occurred when the Khomeini government refused to give Arabs their national and cultural rights, rights that were denied them by the former shah's government. The governor of Khuzistan, Admiral Ahmed Madani, ordered the slaughter of hundreds of citizens of Mohammarah (Khuramshahr) and Abadan, who had resisted the local authorities' actions to close the Arab political and cultural centers in the province. As a result, the Iranian Arab spiritual leader, Ayat Allah Al Shabir El Khaghani, was deported to Qum where he died mysteriously.
- In 1985 an uprising broke out in the Ahwaz area in protest of an article in one of the Iranian newspapers that had offensive material against the Ahwazi Arabs resulting in death of many peaceful demonstrators.
- In 1994, a bloody confrontation took place between Iranian security forces and the Arabistanis whose lands had been confiscated in the "Sugar Cane" project in the province (Khuzistan). Many peasant landowners were killed.
- In an unprecedented step in the history of modern Iran, in 1997, the elected president, Khatami, assigned an Arab minister, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, who is considered an exceptional case in the Islamic Republic, as he is the only Arab who was ever appointed to a high government position.
- In 2000, violent confrontation occurred between Iranian security forces and Arabs who protested against the forgery of the parliamentary election results. Likewise, bloody confrontation took place between the security forces and the citizens of Abadan City, who demonstrated against the polluted running water and drying out of the Karoon River and its tributaries. This resulted from government damming and diversion of the Karoon and Karkheh rivers. Many people were killed and injured.

Farsization and Ethnic Cleansing:

- Iranian government's policies in Khuzistan are aimed at obliterating the Arabic national and cultural identities of the Iranian Arabs, who are considered the largest Arab population in the Gulf area after the Iraqi and Saudi peoples.
- Iranian policies have not only targeted the Arabs, but also other non-Persians in the country such as the Kurds, Azeri, Baluchis and Turkomans, although to various degrees. These policies are principally the same, and were applied both during the

Shah's reign and the current regime. The policies of the former were based on a strict agenda of making everything Persian: "Persianization" or "Farsization". The policy depended heavily upon pre-Islamic Persian heritage as its main criterion and source of inspiration, while also drawing upon Persian chauvinism and sectarianism, with the aim of alienating the non-Persian ethnic groups and cultures. The result of these hegemonic policies was the economic, social and cultural retardation of the non-Persians who make up 60% of Iran's total population, leading to pervasive national crises among Iran's ethnic groups. This bred resentment and severe feelings of oppression and vulnerability among the country's minority populations, especially the Arabs. The policies also played an important role in bringing about the revolution against the Shah.

- The Islamic Republic continues the policy of "Persianization", however this time in the guise of Islamic brotherhood and national unity. The current situations are becoming alarmingly explosive by exacerbating existing ethnic and religious crises and contributing to already dire social, economic, and political conditions.
- The Iranian government authorities in the Khuzistan province refuse to register and issue birth identity cards to Arab newborn babies who do not assume Persian names. Names that sometimes contradict with their cultural and religious belief. This is in line with the regime's refusal to consent to the Khuzistani Arabs' request to change back to their historical names. Names of cities, towns, villages, rivers and other geographical landmarks, which were changed from Arabic to Persian names during the previous Pahalavi regimes. These historical Arabic names existed for centuries. Although, in some instances, it agreed to do so in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and some other provinces.
- One of the greatest ironies of this situation is the fact that Islam is based on the Holy Quran, which is written in the Arabic language and heavily influenced by Arab culture, and yet, the regime does not allow the study of the Arabic language by its Arab peoples. One would think that the Islamic regime of Iran would have nothing to fear by allowing the use of Quranic Arabic. But for the past twenty-three years, the regime tried to utilize a false cover of religious and Islamic brotherhood to subjugate its Iranian Arab citizens and deny them their linguistic and cultural rights.
- The Arabs of Iran are being caught in the politics of the region. Arab countries of the Middle East are keeping silent to the repression of the Ahwazi Arabs (particularly in the mass media) as they did during the Shah's aggressive policy against the people of Arabistan. However some Arab countries, in accordance with their own opportunistic interests and when faced with a significant disagreement with the regime in Tehran, will raise the question of the Arabistan issue as a point of contention. The silence of such countries, along with the media blockade in Iran, has contributed to quelling of the Arab-Iranian political leaders and intellectuals who attempted to raise their human rights issues among the Iranian populace, the western and Arab countries and to international human rights organizations. This despite the fact that since modern Iran was established in 1925, the question of Arabistan and Arab Iranians was one of the most important foreign policy issues faced by the government because of its direct

effect on the national security and economy of Iran. The importance of Arabistan in domestic and foreign transactions is very clear to the authorities in Iran. It plays an important role in shaping Iranian policies and attitudes towards the Arab World, especially the border countries.

Oil Wealth and Strategic Importance of Arabistan (Khuzistan)

- Arabistan is recognized for its unique economic and strategic importance. It links Iranian territories with the Arab countries and is located on the Gulf and “Shat El-Arab” (waterway). Arabistan has huge petroleum wealth, which constitutes the main source of income for the Iranian economy or about 90% of the total Iranian income from oil. Despite being at the heart of economic prosperity in the country, the Iranian Arab population is kept severely backwards, with extremely high illiteracy rates, unemployment, abject poverty, and drug usage among the youth.

Khuzistan Sugar Cane Project and Confiscation of land:

- Iran pursues a very chauvinistic and undemocratic domestic policy towards the Arabs in Iran. In recent years the central government in Iran has confiscated Arab lands in Khuzistan under the pretext of the failed “Sugar Cane” plantation, while settling other non-Arabs, in particular Persians, in the area. According to former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is considered the primary backer of the “Sugar Cane” project, it is the biggest national agricultural project in the modern history of Iran. The project is considered illegitimate by Arabs, who see the purpose of the project to be the unjustifiable confiscation of their lands in order to replace them by non-Arab settlers so as to get rid of the Arab population in the province. In this regard it is not different in its nature or aim from any other (forced) re-settlement projects that have occurred historically.
- The Arabs affected by the resettlement project refused to give up their land and resisted the plan. This in turn led to a bloody confrontation between the Arabs and local authorities from 1994 to 1995. The result was the murder of many Arab landowners and forced seizure of their lands. This raised anger among the Arabs in Al-Ahwaz and even among some government officials. One such official, Mr. Hashemi Zadeh, a former representative of Ahwaz City in the last Islamic parliament, angrily protested the confiscation of Arab lands, the refusal of the government to pay a fair compensation for the lands, and the use of violence against the protesters, along with some of his colleagues. This settlement project is a continuation of the Shah’s policy. The Shah’s government had set up a Persian settlement near the Arab town of Al-Howaizeh. That settlement was called “Yazd No” (New Yazd), because most of the people were brought from the Persian city of Yazd in the center of Iran (the birthplace of president Khatami). However, the rightful Arab owners of the land removed the aforementioned settlement, following the revolution in 1979.

- The expansion of the “Sugar Cane” project by the Islamic Republic of Iran, in addition to many other factors, has led to a worsening of the situations between Arabs of Khuzistan and the Islamic Republic. These factors include the Iranian government’s insistence on refusing a fair payment for confiscated Arab lands; the slow pace of reconstruction in the areas destroyed by the Iran-Iraq war; the refusal of the Iranian government to care for the environment and solve the problem of polluted running water resulting from the “Sugar Cane” project; the increase in drug addiction and the unemployment crisis; and finally, administrative corruption and the use of non-Arab staff for the most important government positions in the province. Moreover, local authorities in the area continue to enforce the policy of prohibiting the use of the Arabic language in government and administrative offices. They also disallow the use of Arabic names for newborn babies, except in the case of ordinary Shiite religious names.

And finally, the complete militarization of the province and intensification of its attack on Arab Iranian activists in the past year: According to a recent Amnesty International Press Release, in the past few months, seventeen Arab and Kurdish human rights activists have been sentenced to death and are reportedly at risk of imminent execution. Moreover, five Arab Iranian men were hanged in Ahwaz, Southwestern Iran, on January 27 of this year, for opposing the government’s policy of Arab land seizure in Khuzistan province. Their names are as follows: Fadhill Muqaddam, Rahim Sawari, Amir Sa’idi, Hashem Bawi and Abbas Sherhani.

We hope that the situation illuminated in these pages moves you to take some action with regard to the plight of our besieged population in Iran. We are more than willing to provide you with more information and/or eyewitness testimony as to the crimes against humanity being inflicted upon the Arabs of Iran.

We urge you to correspond with us regarding any possible recourse we may take or any direction you may wish to lead us in, in order to effectively alleviate the suffering of our people. Please use the contact information below to respond to this urgent plea.

Respectfully yours,

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