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Protecting the environment in the face of violence against minorities

Al Ahwaz current study

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## 1. Introduction

I will begin with the aims of this seventh session on the rights and issues of minorities, which centre on factors leading to violence and the perpetration of crimes. These include addressing the failure of good governance and the rule of law and a failure to respect human rights which belittles minority groups as well as varieties of discrimination against them in political, economic, cultural and social spheres which arise from time to time and develop into crimes against humanity and the environment.

Beginning with the international legal framework on minorities in which the General Assembly of the United Nations in its preamble considered as amongst its concerns the: 'promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities contribute to the political and social stability of States in which they live' and 'constant promotion and realization of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, as an integral part of the development of society as a whole and within a democratic framework based on the rule of law, would contribute to the strengthening of friendship and cooperation among peoples and States.'

From these two starting points Spher International, an organisation for human and environmental rights puts forward this paper which makes clear the correlation between human rights and the environment. It takes Al Ahwaz as a real life example which throws light on how the violation of human rights in this region has led to a violation of environmental rights. The two violations have caused a lack of political stability and vice versa; if the Iranian government took care of economic and human development in its minority provinces by protecting their rights and treated them as an indivisible part of its territory, and if it met their basic requirements treating them as fully part of the Iranian people (beginning with the right to life and ending with the right to live in a suitable environment) then political stability in the country would be achieved. In short these actions would result in everyone being winners.

## 2. Spher International

An international organisation to protect environmental and human rights founded in April 2013, SPHER 'Society for the Protection of Human and Environmental Rights'. The ethos of the organisation is based on contributing to improving the human and environmental situation by focussing on human rights according to international environmental law and the international law on human rights. Therefore Spher International strives to emphasise the importance of political stability as a basis for

protecting human and environmental rights. To realise the interconnection between human rights and environmental rights and that the two are subject to violations during times of political instability. We aim to spread awareness of this interconnection and we also shed light on the importance of political stability to maintain legal control over protecting human and environmental rights.

### 3. Iran

Iran has a particular geopolitical position as the meeting point between three Asian fronts, (West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia) and Iran's geographical position also separates the peninsula from Central Asia as well as its mountains (Zagros) which prevent the cold fronts coming from Siberia from reaching the Arab peninsula and the north winds coming from it divert the pollution from Iranian factories onto the south west of the Arabian gulf. In short, the geopolitical position of Iran influences the region both politically and in terms of climate.

Iran doesn't only have regional power but also has power in terms of international energy security and the global economy due to its large reserves of oil and natural gas. It has the second largest reserves of natural gas in the world and the fourth largest confirmed reserves of petrol.

Iran has a population of more than 75 million, most of them Muslims (Shia and Sunni). It also has Christian and Jewish minorities as well as Baha'is, Mandeans, Zoroastrians and Yarsanis as does Iraq amongst its population. In addition to the Persian majority, there are Kurds and Turkmen and Baluchis and Armenians and Arabs and they are the subject of this paper. The inhabitants of Iran speak more than 110 languages, the most prevalent after Farsi being Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Turkmenistani, Balochi, Sistani and Bandari (Gulf), Hebrew as well as Arabic.

### 4. Al Ahwaz

It is the regional capital of Khuzestan 'the land of castles' which was known as Arabistan 'land of the Arabs' before Britain divided it up to lessen the official influence on the region from Iraq and to incorporate it into Iran. It is now an Arab region occupying the heart of Iran (Western Central) geographically and economically (the province produces 70% of Iran's oil resources). The Zagros mountains separate it from the rest of the Iranian Islamic Republic. This natural separation has played an important role throughout history in the cultural differences between the people who live to the East of it (the Persians) and those who live to its West (the Arabs).

**[Under the larger map] 'The map of the province of Al Ahwaz'**

**[Under the smaller map] 'The geographical position of the province of Al Ahwaz'**

In spite of most of the Arabs in Khuzestan being Shia, the Shia of this province suffer from the despotic policies of clerical rule and from oppression of this province, whether intentional or not, of both the environment and the people in equal measure.

### 5. Human and Environmental Violence in Arabistan/ Khuzestan

From the previous presentation on the demography of the Iranian Islamic Republic we note that it is amongst several countries with deep rooted religious sectarian roots across

history. This cultural variety is present as a result of the geographical makeup of the country, the succession of cultures coming there over the course of time, and the size of its open spaces which partly exist as a consequence of British imperialism. The demarcation of the borders which the British imperialists imposed gave rise to a lack of political stability in some provinces such as in Arabistan/ Khuzestan and also to the emergence there of violations against human and environmental rights. These violations were not just confined to the government itself, however, the Iranian government continued this legacy in spite of differences of ideology and direction (Pahlavi and Shia). The violation of human rights was epitomised by the deprivation from education, the right to health, and even occasionally, the right to life, as well as violating some freedoms. As for environmental rights they appeared in the mismanagement of water and its pollution by industrial emissions, especially chemical waste which was deposited in the rivers and the Arabian gulf. In addition to this, dams exacerbated the frequency of earthquakes in the region and these industrial practices, whether intentionally or not, damaged both the people and the environment.

#### 1. Violence against the Al Ahwazi people

The Arabs in Al Ahwaz have been exposed to various forms of violence, whether direct or indirect, since Britain incorporated the province into Iran. This is in spite of most of its inhabitants being Shia. However, the Shia clerical government treat them with racial discrimination in a totally different way from which they support the Shia Arabs in Bahrain.

These violations can be summed up in the rulings on arbitrary executions and the use of Arab soldiers from Al Ahwaz in the front line during regional wars as occurred during the Iran-Iraq war, in addition to extermination, enslavement, forced transfer, rape and coercion into prostitution and other forms of sexual violence. This is according to reports made by the Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation.

Amongst other forms of violence, illiteracy is widespread within the Al Ahwaz population, and there is a lack of schools and teachers and deprivation from education in their mother tongue (Arabic) Another form of violence and discrimination is a lack of medical services and this leads to illnesses such as eye tumours and some skin diseases resulting from air and water pollution in the region.

#### 2. Violence against the environment in Al Ahwaz

Violence against the environment in Al Ahwaz and damage to it is exemplified by the concentration of heavy industry in all its forms in the region. In addition there has been misuse of water, whether due to exhausting it in industrial practices or due to changing the course of the tributaries of the river Karun and diverting its waters to the interior of Iran, which completely kills its living environment. Finally, by building dams which leads to an increase in the number of earthquakes in the region.

This year the World Health Organisation has classified the cities in Al Ahwaz as being amongst the most polluted cities in the world. In 2012 the semi-official Mehr news agency in Iran reported that the levels of air pollution in the manufacturing cities of Al Ahwaz (Abadan, Al Ahwaz and Kungahyeh had reached 383, double internationally

acceptable levels whilst Iranian authorities acknowledged that the air pollution levels had reached only 51.

The causes of the increase in the levels of carbon in this region can be attributed to the concentration of factories in it, such as petrochemical, iron, steel and plastics factories, as well as petrochemical companies burning waste.

It is worth noting that natural elements have also increased the levels of air pollution in a region where sand and dust storms occur every summer. These sandstorms blow in from the Arabian peninsula as a result of the lowering in air pressure over the Caspian Sea. Its elevation in the peninsula leads to the movement of winds carrying dust and sand from areas of high pressure in the region to areas of low pressure. These winds cross the region of Al Ahwaz during their journey.

**[Image with caption 'Dust Storm This Weekend'] 'Air depressions of low and high pressure and the movement of sandstorms'**

**[Image to the right of previous image] 'Pictures from NASA showing the density of sandstorms over Al Ahwaz'**

**[Image center-below ] 'Average distribution of the annual number of sandstorms according to a study undertaken by Mustaba Jalboudi and others 2013'**

As for water pollution, this includes river and sea pollution (the Arabian Gulf) as a result of the disposal of chemical and petrochemical waste, and as a result of iron, steel, and petrochemical factories, both of which travel a long way, in addition to nuclear radiation from the Bushehr reactor.

Several third party projects have contributed to the loss of entire habitats as a result of the drying up of the River Karun after the course of its tributaries was diverted to the interior of Iran. This, in addition to building dams on the river and its tributaries which number 74 dams of different sizes; 17 dams in Khuzestan and 55 in the province of Hormozgan and one dam each in the provinces of Bushehr and Ilam. This drying up also led to the desertification of large areas of the region especially the lakes of Fellahia and Howzia and, after the failure of the government's sugar cane project, the burning of thousands of hectares of fields belonging to Ahwazis.

The pollution of sea water became apparent as dead fish were discovered on the northern coasts of Al Ahwaz. The most dangerous finding was an increase in the levels of lead and mercury found in the region's fish as fish is one of the most common meals amongst the Arabs of Al Ahwaz. The pollution of the drinking water not only lead to harmful effects on the region's inhabitants, but it also led to a lack of balance in the earth's crust and an increase in the number of earthquakes in a region which is already prone to them as a result of shifting plates and the proximity of the Arab plate to the Asian tectonic plate. In addition, the accumulation of water reservoirs behind the dams triggered an increase in the frequency of earthquakes in the region according to scientific studies in different parts of the world.

## 6. Conclusion

What rights activists in Al Ahwaz are asking for is straightforward, and could be realised if the Iranian government actually regarded the region of Al Ahwaz as a part of its territory

and the Arab Ahwazis as part of their people. However, it appears that successive Iranian governments (both Pahlavi and clerical), since the region's incorporation into Iran, have not spared any effort in destroying the human rights of the region's people, carrying out ethnic cleansing as if they were not truly part of the Iranian people, and harming the region's environment as if it were not part of the whole country.

The nation has moral obligations and duties regarding rights relating to realising the demands of the Al Ahwazi people as they have signed international treaties on this subject. The activists are asking for steps to be taken which adhere to the fundamental rights which the United Nations outlined for minorities as mentioned above, as follows:

1. Economic, social, political and environmental development.
2. The right to establish parties and have political participation; up to now there has not been a single governor of Al Ahwaz from Al Ahwaz.
3. To enjoy their cultural rights to education and using their mother tongue (Arabic) in schools and universities.
4. Stop executing political activists and carrying out arbitrary arrests
5. Pay attention to the quality of the environment in the region.

In conclusion, if the Iranian government kept to its obligations to its people and the environment in the region of Al Ahwaz, political stability would prevail, as well as social security for the Arabs of Al Ahwaz, and the environmental situation in the region would improve. A small moral obligation from the state towards the people and the place of Al Ahwaz would result in gains for everyone, the government, the people, and the environment.