

Arabs

Profile

Arabs constitute up to 4 million of the population of Iran and those residing in Khuzistan are known as 'Ahwazi Arabs'. They suffer great economic hardship as well as the repression of their language and, for those who are Sunni (whilst the Arabs of Khuzistan are largely Shi'as, those further south near Bandar Abbas are predominantly Sunni), their Sunni beliefs and practice.

Historical context

There has been trade and migration in the countries surrounding the Gulf for centuries and Arabs have long resided in Iran. During the twentieth century, Iraqi attempts to foment unrest among the Arabs in Iran - under the Pahlavi regimes as well as the Islamic Republic - were largely unsuccessful. Arabs of Khuzistan demanded autonomy, like the Baluch, Kurds and Turkoman in 1979, but demonstrated their loyalty to the Islamic regime during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988.

Current issues

There has been a sharp deterioration in the relationship between the Iranian government and Arabs of Khuzistan in recent years. 2003 saw the closing of two newspapers in Khuzistan and the detention of many activists. In April 2004, Sunni MPs wrote to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, deploring the absence of Sunnis in high posts and complaining of anti-Sunni propaganda. In April 2005, demonstrations in a number of cities and towns in Khuzistan led to the killing of up to seven police and officials, after Iranian security forces attempted to break up massive anti-regime demonstrations. Over 30 people were killed and hundreds more injured or detained. The demonstrations had been sparked by the leaking of contents of a disputed governmental document which allegedly planned for the reduction of the Arab dominance of the Khuzistan region through bringing in settlers of Persian and Azeri ethnicity and forcibly moving Arabs away.

There have been a series of bombings- for example in June 2005, October 2005, January 2006, February 2006 and November 2006. A number of these bombings have been followed by televised confessions describing alleged plots against Iran and arranged by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, for example on 13 November 2006 by 10 men sentenced to death for their role in a bombing and their allegations that they had foreign contacts. A report by Human Rights Watch dated 11 November 2006 stated that one of those facing the death sentence was in jail at the time of his alleged crime. 3 of the men were executed in 19 December 2006.

High poverty rates among Ahwazi Arabs, despite their province's production of 90 per cent of Iran's oil revenue, have fuelled resentment, as has discrimination on cultural-linguistic grounds. Some Arabs are Sunni and not allowed to practice their faith publicly, or construct a single Sunni mosque. In January and February 2007 the Iranian government executed eight Ahwazi Arabs for alleged participation in 2005 sabotage of oil infrastructure in Khuzestan by the intentionally excruciating method of slow strangulation. Three UN Rapporteurs deemed the one-day trial deeply flawed. The accused had not been allowed access to their lawyers and, when the Ahwazi lawyers complained, they were arrested. In September the government conducted three more such executions, sparking public protests on which police opened fire. In November 2007, eight additional executions appeared imminent, but an international advocacy campaign subsequently succeeded in removing two Ahwazi men from death row.