

Position Papers

Protests Over Water in Ahwaz: Ongoing Crises and Unfulfilled Solutions

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Protests broke out in the Ahwaz region in mid-July 2021, and they are continuing until now. These protests were preceded by a wave of widespread protests staged by oil workers that began on June 20 at more than 80 oil installations across Iran. In addition, other protests erupted across the country, with workers demanding an increase in the minimum wage, an improvement in working conditions and a speed-up in the payment of overdue benefits.

This position paper casts light on these protests, the reasons behind them, their main characteristics, the way the government has responded to these protests, and the international and regional reactions to these protests. Finally, the future prospects of these protests will be analyzed.

First: Not Merely Protests Over Water Shortages

The protests in the Ahwaz region have escalated since mid-July over the water shortages facing the province. More than 702 villages in Ahwaz suffer from water shortages. Drought and water scarcity in recent months have caused many problems for the people who reside in this region, including farmers and pastoralists. These problems have led to livestock perishing. Ahwazi activists believe that in recent years, Iran has built several dams, and has used them as a political weapon to limit the supply of water to the Ahwazi people to force them into migrating from the region.

While Iran claims that these dams have been built to preempt winter floods, they have been used in some areas to flood Ahwazi villages and destroy their crops during winter, and in summer, to limit their water supply. The Ahwazi people have had to shift from their rural communities to Ahwazi urban areas and mainstream Iranian cities where they have faced marginalization.

Figure 1: The Provinces That Witnessed Protests in Support of the Ahwaz Protests.



Source: <https://bit.ly/3l5n6GS>

The Iranian authorities attempted to limit the protests through dialogue and repression while attempting to address the direct causes of the water crisis. However, the protests are continuing and even expanding in scope despite the repression unleashed by the authorities. The protests have led to the deaths of nine Ahwazi residents and hundreds have been injured. In addition, many have been detained. The protests have a political dimension. Ahwazi protesters chanted slogans against forced displacement and called for an end to racial discrimination. After the protests spilled over to other provinces, Iranian protestors chanted various other slogans including “Death to the dictator,” in reference to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, “We will never be humiliated,” “That’s enough Iranians, show your firmness,” and “Iranians prefer death to submitting to humiliation.” In Iranian cities such as Tehran and Karaj, Iranian protesters chanted “O Shah of Iran...Come to Iran.”

The protesters have depended on social media to keep up the momentum of their protests. They have posted live-stream videos of their protests and documented the repression and harsh crackdown unleashed on them by the Iranian security forces.

This has helped in widening the scope of the protests not only in Ahwaz but also beyond. In addition, social media coverage has led to internal and international reactions against the behavior of Iran’s state apparatuses.

The Ahwazi protests have gained nationwide solidarity, with protests erupting in the city of Tabriz on July 24 and similar protests flaring up in the provinces of Bushehr, Tehran, Isfahan, Lorestan and Kermanshah. Some people who called for protests were arrested and more than 200 lawyers announced their solidarity and support for the protests in Ahwaz. Furthermore, many filmmakers and cultural activists as well as the Iranian Writers’ Association (IWA) announced their solidarity with the wronged people of Ahwaz. This included issuing two statements and gathering at the House of Artists to demand a peaceful solution to the problems facing the people of Ahwaz. Several civil activists also protested to express their solidarity with the people of Ahwaz. They were arrested for several hours, including the human rights activist Narges Mohammadi.

The water crisis in Iran is not considered to be a new problem nor has it been caused by drought or a dip in rainfall levels. In addition, it cannot be blamed on climate change because of global warming. However, mismanagement of the water issue and its excessive use in industry and agriculture as well as flawed policies have exacerbated the water crisis in Ahwaz.

Over the past four decades, the Iranian authorities have not paid sufficient attention to the environment. Unsustainable development policies and interest in short-term benefits have resulted in large-scale environmental deterioration and the loss of natural resources such as water.

Researchers have warned against Iran's development policies and the threat they pose to the country's water, food, social and political security. The Iranian authorities arresting ecologists is indicative of how they address this file.

Instead of appropriate safeguards and proper planning, the extensive construction of dams on riverbeds without sufficient scientific research has led to the present water crisis. In addition, entrusting the IRGC with the matter has worsened the crisis. The former deputy speaker of Iran's Parliament echoed the foregoing. Ali Motaheri said that part of the problem in Ahwaz today is the incorrect location of Gotvand Dam. He called for help to be sought from the best Iranian and foreign experts to execute development projects.

The Rouhani government bears its share of responsibility for the ongoing crisis. When the protests over electricity shortages broke out in many Iranian cities in July 2021, the Iranian authorities worked to plug the electricity deficit gap of 10,000 megawatts through raising the level of water flowing from dams to increase the production of hydroelectricity. Some of these dams play an important role in securing the water supplies necessary for drinking, agricultural practices, and breeding livestock as well as for the Horalazim wetlands. Experts at the time noted that this government policy would aggravate the water problems in the country through next September until the end of the year. Hence, the water crisis would remain unresolved and would be handed over to Ebrahim Raisi's new government.

However, the Iranian government has evaded responsibility and believes that the water crisis in Ahwaz is because of natural phenomena such as drought. In addition, it believes that US sanctions, preventing the transfer of technology and investments in Ahwaz's water sector have contributed to the water crisis. However, the foregoing assertions do not hold any ground in light of Ahwaz's realities.

Although the water shortage is and has been a strong motive during the protests that Ahwaz has experienced over the recent period, in fact, there are more complicated realities fueling anger in the region. This anger is connected to marginalization policies and inequality which Ahwaz suffers from despite it being among Iran's richest regions in terms of water resources. It includes five major rivers which make up more than one third of the water flowing in Iran, including the Karun, Karkha, and Jarahi Rivers. Hence, Ahwaz is an important source of drinking water and irrigation not only for the people of Ahwaz but for the people of Iran in general.

Ahwaz is the source of energy production and exports in Iran and makes up about 87 percent of total oil production in the country, 90 percent of total gas production and 74 percent of total electricity production via dams and natural resources. In addition, Ahwaz's territories include oil and gas reserves in the country — meaning it has the most important oil reservoir in Iran. Despite the foregoing realities, Ahwaz is the poorest and most marginalized region at the economic level and the most excluded at the political level.

Therefore, the anger of the Ahwazi people is closely connected to the systematic policies of marginalization pursued by the Iranian authorities against them. The policies of discrimination and marginalization against the Ahwazi Arabs extends to the issue of water as well. The region inhabited by Arabs who make up the majority of its residents suffers from a disproportionate water shortage due to Iranian authorities diverting the course of the Karun River to the water deprived provinces of Kerman, Yazd and Isfahan. According to experts, the Karun River's water has not been diverted only for drinking purposes, but also for industrial purposes. The abovementioned three central provinces are key arenas for Iranian industrial investments,

including the automobile and steel industries. These investments have increased provincial demands for water, which have been met at the expense of the people of Ahwaz. It is no coincidence that most of the provinces that benefit from the diversion of water and industrial investments are mostly those populated by residents of Persian origin (Kerman, Yazd, and Isfahan).

The real unemployment rate in most parts of Ahwaz ranges between 45 percent to 50 percent. The region lacks basic services and has inadequate infrastructure. The region's residents do not benefit from the job opportunities created by the oil, gas and petrochemical industries. Rather, most of the region's residents rely on agriculture and livestock. The foregoing factors have fueled anger and have instigated the recent protests.

In the end, the water crisis has left the region's residents with no alternatives. Some experts believe that the government's policies are deliberate, to force residents to leave and for them to be replaced with residents of Persian and Lori origin who are loyal to the government and the system. There is no doubt a systematic policy of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion have contributed to the recent wave of protests in Ahwaz.

Overall, it could be said that the Ahwazi protests are characterized by: an expanding geographical scope with the protests expanding day after day; young men playing a major role in the protests; unprecedented support from various Iranian factions for the Ahwaz protests; and the failure of the Iranian government to link the protests to ethnic or separatist demands.

Second: A Mix of Repression and Politics to Contain the Crisis

The Iranian authorities have adopted two main approaches to contain the recent wave of protests. The methods and tools differ, but the objective is the same: to end the protests as soon as possible and prevent their further geographical expansion.

1- **Security approach:** the Iranian authorities over the past years have always responded to the protests that have broken out across

different Iranian regions and cities from time to time by executing a host of security and military steps to end the protests, which are deemed a threat to the future of the Iranian political system.

The most important security measures to address the ongoing protests include the following:

(A) The use of repressive force and the deployment of security forces, IRGC units and Basij forces to quell the protests. The aforementioned responded to the protests with live fire, intimidation and a campaign of arrests. These repressive measures left several protesters dead while others were detained.

(B) Cordoning off Iranian cities experiencing protests, especially Ahwaz city, which is considered the source of the spark of expanding protests over Ahwaz's water shortage. The visit of the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Major General Hossein Salami to Ahwaz — the epicenter of the protests — indicated to the protesters that the Iranian government is prepared to unleash excessive repressive measures if the protests continue. There is no explanation for Salami's visit other than to intimidate the protesters and send a message that the Iranian government is ready to respond with the harshest forms of force and repression.

In addition, the Iranian government deployed the country's security forces and riot police to Ahwaz as well as to several other major cities to crack down on the protesters. The clashes between the security forces and protesters left one policeman dead and another injured in the city of Mahshahr, south of Ahwaz.

(C) Recalling militias, spread throughout neighboring countries, to crush the Ahwazi protests. The Iranian authorities recalled more than 1,500 members of its aligned militias in Iraq, affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces, to help it to contain the protests expanding across Iranian provinces.

(D) Impeding internet and social media platforms to slow down the transmission of information from hotspots and curb the ability of protesters to express their political anger or communicate with fellow countrymen at home or with the international community. This approach is usually pursued by the Iranian government each

time the country witnesses widespread protests.

This security approach was denounced by various Iranian factions including politicians, pundits, artists, and sportsmen. Iran's former Presidents Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad criticized, in two separate statements, the security measures and the repressive tools used to respond to the protests in Ahwaz.

2- **Political handling:** in conjunction with prioritizing the security approach to contain the expanding wave of protests, the Iranian government adopted other measures to swiftly contain the anger of the protesters. The government pledged to undertake swift reforms to address the direct causes triggering the recent crisis or pointed the finger of blame at external parties and accused them of instigating the protests for political reasons. In addition, Iran's government was accused by opposition factions of complacency and mismanagement, both of which have led to the recent crisis.

(A) There have been attempts to calm the situation and contain the growing anger by Iranian officials — departing from their traditional approach in dealing with past protests in Iran. Some Iranian officials expressed sympathy towards the protesters and some media outlets presented “controlled coverage” of the protests showing sympathy as well in order to contain public anger and quickly limit the scope of the protests.

The foregoing was indicative in the remarks of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who defended the rights of the protesters to express anger and take to the streets. He called on the new Iranian government to prioritize the crisis taking place in Ahwaz. He evaded responsibility for the crisis by blaming the Iranian government. He said that the problems of Ahwaz and water shortages are caused by not paying heed to his recommendations and directives.

Plus, the outgoing President Hassan Rouhani announced the setting up of a strategic emergency committee to investigate the consequences of the crisis. This is in addition to pledging to offer serious solutions and dispatching military officials and politicians to address the water crisis. Rouhani also sent his First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri to the region to understand the causes of the crisis and attempt to develop swift solutions. In addition to the foregoing, the government has attempted to contain the protests through communicating with Ahwazi tribal leaders and

dignitaries.

Jahangiri met with a number of Arab tribal leaders in Ahwaz and promised to meet their demands in return for them playing a role in limiting the protests. He announced opening up the gates of Al-Karkha Dam to redirect part of the water to rivers. As for the IRGC, it provided several regions with 60 tankers of water. The chief justice ordered swift measures to be taken to ensure the release of detained protesters. These steps would not have taken place if the Iranian government did not sense the serious challenge posed by these expanding protests, especially with the protesters gaining sympathy from the Iranian street and various Iranian factions.

The Iranian government resorting to calming the situation may be attributed to multiple reasons, foremost of which is that the protests highlighted essential demands and therefore repression would only exacerbate the situation. It also reveals how far the government has failed and has caused disasters in some cases, and the IRGC was charged with establishing hundreds of dams in Iran without conducting sufficient scientific studies.

The government also fears that the ongoing state of anger over electricity and water shortages will converge with the state of political anger which was expressed via the Iranian people in shunning the presidential election, hence leading to massive protests like those that broke out in 2009.

Through quelling the situation, the government wants to outline specific boundaries for the protests, thereby preventing them from becoming further politicized. Hence, the government wants to prevent protests from continuing up to the time when Ebrahim Raisi is inaugurated, hence creating a calm atmosphere to allow him to carry out his project and implement his program. If the protests continue, they will impose restrictions on Raisi at the beginning of his tenure and give the “reformists” an opportunity to return to the scene and take advantage of the anti-Raisi protests. The “conservatives” previously exploited past protests to diminish Rouhani’s popularity and thwart his reform program.

On the other side, the government is preparing for negotiations with

the West and the United States over its nuclear program and does not want the protests to widen, the humanitarian situation to worsen nor the domestic pressures to escalate. Hence, the other parties have been granted a powerful lever to force the Iranian government to compromise. The United States wants to amend the nuclear deal to include Iran's regional behavior and its ballistic missile program.

(B) Stooze and traitor labels: despite pretending to defend the rights of protesters, it seems that the customary conspiracy theories will be invoked, as they are a means for the government to escape the ongoing limbo and cover up its failure to meet public demands.

The main reasons behind the spread of the protests in the cities of Ahwaz were attributed to “enemies” along with “dissident media” and “separatist groups” operated by external parties. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who regularly employs the label “enemy” in his speeches, did not change his behavior. He hinted that there were external parties that were aggravating the situation when he called on the protesters not to give the enemies of Iran “a pretext” as the enemy was seeking to take advantage of the ongoing protests to attack the country and the revolution as well as to undermine the Iranian people's interests.

Third: Tentative International Criticism and Calculations Related to the Vienna Negotiations

Amid the mounting protests in Ahwaz since July 23, international rights organizations and nongovernmental organizations expressed their solidarity with the protesters. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet condemned the Iranian authorities and called on them to address the chronic problem of water shortage in Ahwaz instead of using excessive force and activating a campaign of arrests to quell the protests.

For its part, Amnesty International announced that the number of protesters killed reached eight, including a teenager. According to rights groups, Iran is using excessive force to repress and quell the protests.

In a statement, Human Rights Watch announced that the Iranian forces responded to the protesters with excessive force and urged the govern-

ment to launch a transparent inquiry into the aforesaid cases of repression and killing, instead of continuing to clampdown on the protesters.

Washington expressed support for the Iranian protesters. Spokesman for the US Department of State Ned Price regarding the protests commented on July 22, 2021: “We support the right of the Iranians to peaceful protests and expressing themselves. The Iranians must enjoy these rights without fearing violence or arbitrary arrests by the security forces.”

The following day, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter reiterated the same points while indicating two additional matters. The first was that the United States is closely following reports proving that Iran’s security forces had opened fire on unarmed protesters and reports of the Iranian government disabling internet access in Ahwaz. The second was that the Biden administration has attributed the recent protests to the Iranian government’s policies of marginalization and mismanagement of water resources, which have exacerbated Iran’s severest drought in five decades.

Finally, the US Department of State issued on July 28 a statement regarding the protests in Iran. In the statement, it condemned Iranian security forces’ firing on peaceful protesters, and their use of criminal violence. In addition, the statement reiterated that the United States is following events closely, especially reports of the Iranian government disabling the internet and banning citizens from accessing information online. The statement noted that the Iranian government should allow its citizens to exercise their right to freedom of expression and free access to information via the internet.

However, Western countries are deterred from addressing what is going on in Iran is because of two factors. The first factor is the crucial turning point reached at the Vienna talks and the pause in these talks following Raisi’s presidential victory in Iran. However, the United States has designated multiple Iranian individuals, notably Ebrahim Raisi for his role in crushing the 2019 protests.

The European parties have always condemned the flagrant violations committed by Iran’s security forces against protesters and imposed economic sanctions on Tehran. The latest European move was to place the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Hossein Salami along with seven

commanders of Iran's Basij forces and police on the sanctions list in April due to the campaign of repression and crackdown unleashed by the Iranian authorities in November 2019.

The second factor is the fact that the protests at this moment in time are limited to certain regions unlike the widespread protests of 2019. It would be concerning for the Iranian government if widespread protests break out once again in light of the deteriorating economic and social conditions gripping the country and the eroding legitimacy of the political system. Iranian officials are fully aware of the current situation's danger and potential complexities — especially if accompanied by international support while Iran is going through a critical stage.

Fourth: Superficial Solutions and Ongoing Crises

The Iranian government dealt with the protesters over the water crisis in Ahwaz from a security perspective. However, after the Ahwazis' plight attracted widespread solidarity, particularly from many Iranian residents across different Iranian provinces, the government was prompted to look for swift solutions to address the underlying causes of the recent protests. It made new political and developmental pledges, as well as pledges to engage in real reforms. But it appears that the government's solutions are merely temporary and not radical enough to address the root causes. This means that the protests will remain open to all scenarios.

The huge support which the protesters in Ahwaz have received from various provinces is the first of its kind in the history of the protests that this region has been witnessing. The recent protests have revealed that the water crisis in Ahwaz is not merely due to drought, but the government's policies of diverting water to other provinces and establishing dams on rivers have contributed significantly to the region's water problems. They have also revealed that the Iranian street believes there is a genuine crisis in Ahwaz which has nothing to do with separatist and nationalist objectives.

The media outlets affiliated with the Iranian government have attempted to sow discord by projecting that the protests have an ethnic

dimension and that some of the protesters have chanted separatist slogans in Arabic. But the rallies supportive of the residents of Ahwaz indicate that the government's attempt to stir ethnic divisions has not worked. The intervention of various social and political forces, as well as artists and sportsmen to express their sympathy with the Ahwazi protesters is a turning point in opposition to the Iranian government — some people have called this turning point the revolutionary transformation against the Iranian political system.

The protesters' criticizing and labeling Ali Khamenei as a dictator, as well as criticizing the Iranian government following the protests over the past few years, indicates the growing popular discontent against the political system. Iran's crises rest on disastrous government policies.

On balance, it could be said that the incoming Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi will begin his tenure while facing a state of widespread anger. His policies will be at stake. But the government will surely have the ability to control the ongoing wave of protests, especially as it is dealing with crucial issues at home and abroad. It is in the government's interest to ease any tensions that could impede its plans to rehabilitate the system and restore the stature of the "conservatives" which has declined in recent years.

All the foregoing does not negate the fact that there are problems that the government is unable to radically address, and this has sparked consecutive waves of protests, which have dented the legitimacy of the government and its leadership.



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