

## A water crisis explodes in parched Iran

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Unprecedented water shortages in Iran have sparked protests across southwestern Khuzestan that have quickly spread to other regions, a popular uprising that threatens wider stability as authorities violently crack down.

Residents of Khuzestan provincial cities have taken to the streets for the past 12 days to demand a swift solution to the water crisis and resignation of local authorities who they believe are corrupt and incompetent.

In a show of solidarity, people across Iran in Aligudarz, Karaj, Isfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz, Tehran, Saqqez, Zanjan and various other cities have also taken to the streets, chanting slogans decrying authorities for their perceived endemic mismanagement of Khuzestan.

On social media, hashtags such as “Khuzestan is thirsty” in Persian are strongly trending. Journalists, lawyers, artists, actors and actresses and ordinary people are expressing support with the people of Khuzestan through petitions, online campaigns and solidarity gatherings.

Authorities have responded with characteristic violence and rolling blackouts of the internet. Human Rights Watch has confirmed the deaths of at least eight protesters, including a 17-year-old youth, and “mass arrests.”

Local media report that there is currently a critical paucity of drinking water in 11 cities of the province, while 700 villages are beset by water tensions as people only get access to clean water for drinking and hygiene with the help of tankers that are periodically dispatched by the government and armed forces. Almost the entire province is suffering from a lack of water access, and pledges by the authorities to remedy the crisis haven’t mollified a furious public.

Aside from a severe drought, considered by some to be the upshot of climate change, other reasons cited for the simmering crisis in Khuzestan are the unbridled construction of dams, illicit extraction of water from the rivers flowing into the region and a project underway to channel the water resources of the Karun, Iran’s longest and only navigable river, to Isfahan province.

Khuzestan is reputed to be the nerve center of Iran’s oil-dependent economy as it owns nearly 80% of the country’s crude and 60% of its natural gas reserves. Despite this, it has been kept systematically

deprived and underdeveloped over the past four decades, and lack of investment in its infrastructure has rendered it one of the most indigent regions in Iran.

In 2016, the Majlis Research Center estimated that 11.82% of Khuzestan inhabitants lived below the poverty line, one of the highest poverty rates nationally. Figures by the Statistical Center of Iran released earlier this year show Khuzestan has an unemployment rate of 12.9%, which is notably higher than most of the country's industrial and high-income provinces.

Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan, sits on at least 500 oil wells. Ahvaz Field is a giant oil field discovered in 1953, known to be one of the largest oil fields in the world with estimated proven reserves of 65.5 billion barrels. In 2019, President Hassan Rouhani announced that a new oil field had been excavated containing 53 billion barrels of crude.

But the riches have scarcely gone to develop Khuzestan or shore up its health, education, roads, infrastructure and utilities and provide its youths with well-paid jobs.

The southwestern province is also home to a restive ethnic Arab minority, whose grievances have remained unaddressed. Some observers say the government deliberately refuses to empower them because they might potentially harbor plans for secession.

Other experts note the highly centralized power structure of Iran, which thrives on disproportionately boosting the infrastructure of the capital Tehran while putting the development of peripheral regions on the backburner.

Improving the livelihoods of Khuzestan residents, hundreds of kilometers from Tehran, does not count as a priority.

"I think Khuzestan is being treated as a colony of the state," said Elham Naej, a research fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization at Deakin University in Australia.

"By colonization, I mean the state with each consecutive government has usurped this province's resources and used the income for its own empowerment, which has left the province impoverished."

Naej admits that the economic sanctions slapped on Iran are also to blame for the tribulations facing Khuzestan. But she says the onus is ultimately on the government to guarantee the wellbeing of its people and ensure they have access to basics such as electricity and water while the national economy is in the doldrums.

"Some people blame the sanctions, and I don't want to say sanctions are ineffective, but the question is 'What does the state do to support its people against the sanctions?' and even 'What does the state do for its people in general?' They are investing their budget on other priorities and the satisfaction of the people is definitely not even at the bottom of the list," she told Asia Times.

State-affiliated media have been quick to attribute the protests to the notorious cult Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK) and the Al-Ahwaziya group, officially known as the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz, which the Iranian government has designated as a terror group.

Such characterization of the protests has allowed the state to justify its forceful clampdown on a legitimate campaign to voice popular resentment and objections to poor living conditions and state neglect.

This time, though, the Iranian authorities – breaking away from their traditional response of bad-mouthing the protests that erupt occasionally and vilifying the protesters as pawns of foreign powers – eventually acknowledged that a problem exists and needs to be resolved.

Eight days after the flare-up of the protests, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the water crisis in Khuzestan was “a painful concern.”

He lamented that his previous recommendations on water supply and sewage problems in Khuzestan had not been heeded by executive officials. Otherwise “this situation wouldn’t have emerged that would cause the faithful people of Khuzestan to be discontent and upset.”

He also made it clear that he understood the people who expressed their frustration couldn’t be blamed because the water crisis is not “a tiny issue.”

President Rouhani, who is overseeing the final days of his tenure, also reacted to the upheaval but didn’t accept responsibility for the security forces’ lethal clampdown.

Instead, Rouhani blamed some “aberrant” people for flaming the violence.

“For a people living under the 50 degrees Celsius heat with water shortage, it is their intrinsic right to speak out, protest and take to the streets,” he said. In such circumstances, however, “an aberrant person” might come forward and use firearms and shoot others and kill a citizen.

“I ask the people of Khuzestan, if there’s a problem, let’s tackle it legally and refuse to allow our enemies to celebrate,” the outgoing president said.

International observers have found it difficult to assess the situation on the ground in Khuzestan due to the restrictions facing Iranian journalists in reporting from what is a de facto crisis zone, as well as the absence of foreign correspondents.

But still many feel authorities’ attempt to link a popular protest to foreign adversaries and fringe cults is hackneyed.

“It is hard to get an accurate and independent perspective, but thus far we’ve seen a heavy-handed response from security services,” said Bessma Momani, a professor of political science at the University of Waterloo in Canada.

“They’ve in the past accused neighboring Arab countries of interfering to undermine Iranian territorial integrity,” she said.

“Undoubtedly there is co-ethnic sympathy for the region that extends into Arab countries. But none of the neighbors have territorial ambitions. Seeing how Iran has extensive involvement in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, it’s quite ironic for the Iranian regime to make accusations against Arab countries,” she added. Less skeptical experts frame the crisis in Khuzestan as a byproduct of global phenomena intertwined with the Iranian government’s poor administration.

Kaveh Ehsani, an associate professor of international studies at DePaul University, maintains the current crisis in Khuzestan has been generated by multiple factors, some local, others national, regional and even global.

“Not only Iran, but the entire region is in the throes of a major chronic drought. This is not limited to Iran since Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan and others are also in a similar predicament. Rich and tiny Kuwait, Qatar, or United Arab Emirates ramp up their desalination plants to continue watering their golf courses, in a way that much larger and poorer Iran or Iraq cannot,” he said.

“The sidelining and weakening of the professional class has only made things worse. Since 2005, at least, the conservative military and intelligence apparatus has been slowly but surely sidelining technocrats whom they don’t fully trust, and taking over economic and technical institutions that provide these public services and undermining their performance through corruption and incompetence,” Ehsani added.

“Add to this the catastrophic social and environmental impact of misconceived major development projects such as multipurpose dams, water transport schemes, agribusinesses, and others, or the government’s poor record of monitoring underground aquifer extraction over decades, and you get the perfect storm that is affecting the ability of the public sector to supply basic needs such as potable water or electricity,” he told Asia Times.