

The Iranian Regime's Targeted Assault on Protesting Ahwazi People

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Brief Analysis

Iranian regime forces and affiliated militias have been taking advantage of the world's diverted attention to carry out a campaign of slaughter and mass arrests against the country's Ahwazi Arabs. These **killings are occurring in the Ma`shour (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html>)** (also known as the Bandar-e Ma`shour) area of the Arab Ahwaz region of Iran as part of the regime's forces perpetration of similar atrocities across the country, and are part of a larger project to repress the welling up of protests against Iran across the region.

In the Ahwaz region, protests broke out predominantly due to the worsening living conditions and sudden increase in fuel prices in an already impoverished region, along with frustrations regarding systemic corruption, high unemployment, and the regime's anti-Arab racism and brutality. An additional catalyst was the suspicious death of a 29-year-old Ahwazi poet named Hassan Haidari from poisoning, who is believed to have been held in regime custody directly prior to his death.

The demonstrations began on Friday, November 8, when Ahwazi citizens took to the streets in the interconnected cities of Khour Mousa, Ma`shour, and Koura. As one local rights activist told us by email (his name is withheld to protect his safety): "Ma`shour, Koura, and Jarahi, which are an interconnected area, should be renamed the 'land of blood and fire.'

Ma`shour, Koura, and Jarahi have been particularly targeted by the regime as they are known as the seat of the petrochemical industry in Iran. **Protesters blocked the roads (<https://www.radiozamaneh.com/477937>)** leading to the state-owned petrochemical and industrial companies' facilities in the area by setting tires laid across the road on fire. These facilities were targeted by protesters not just for their significance to the state, but also because they are widely resented in the area due to their racist policies towards the local Arab peoples. Mobile phone footage obtained from the area shows the protesters moving the blockades aside to allow civilian cars and other vehicles unconnected with the oil industry to pass through, with only the petrochemical firms' vehicles prevented from entering and leaving.

In a recent academic presentation of a paper due to be published shortly, researcher Aaron Eitan Meyer emphasized

that as far back as the 1950s, the American Central Intelligence Agency identified Ahwaz as Iran's potential 'Achilles' heel,' as it contained resources without which no regime could maintain control. This bitter reality is something the Ahwazi people understand all too well.

Thus, despite being peaceful and non-violent, the protesters' success in stopping work at the petrochemical facilities may have enraged the regime even more than similar protests elsewhere in the country calling for freedom and democracy. The Ahwaz region is home to over 95 percent of the oil and gas resources claimed by the Iranian regime and thus is overwhelmingly the source of the regime's remaining income. In response to this threat to their economic lifeline, Iran's Revolutionary Guards have carried out brutal killings with tanks and machine guns against those protesting.

In Ma`shour, the local police intervened a week after the protests began and again the following day but failed to resolve the situation to the regime's satisfaction. At this point, the regime clearly decided to unleash brute force, with special forces deployed to the area on Sunday, November 17 without any interim attempts to defuse tensions. These forces opened fire randomly at the protesters in an effort to intimidate them and force them to disperse, killing and wounding many in the process. Despite this, the protesters refused to abandon their demonstrations.

The attacks increased the following morning. Protesters in the town of Jarahi observed the arrival of a large number of heavily armed regime troops, tanks, IRGC naval forces and the IRGC's elite Malik al-Ashtar brigade, and members of the NOPO (the regime's 'Counter-terrorism' Special Force). The latter act on the orders of the heads of the Amīr al-Mu'minīn Unit of Special Units Command of Law Enforcement Force of Islamic Republic of Iran. All of these forces first assembled in the town's Bathat Square, then moved to the outskirts of the town to target protesters directly.

Military commanders leading the IRGC forces led detachments to a small area of marshland adjacent to the road just outside the town, known locally as Hor al-Jarahi, where the protesters had gathered. Eyewitnesses reported that, without attempting to negotiate, the IRGC troops and militias opened fire on the protesters, many of whom were women and children, using heavy machine guns and other weapons. Some of the protesters took cover in the marshlands while others ran back into the town and sought shelter there. The intensive gunfire against the protesters in the marshlands began at around 10:30 am and continued for four hours, leaving many dead or wounded.

After removing some of the bodies of the dead and arresting the wounded, as well as detaining a number of citizens uninvolved with the protests, regime forces reentered the town of Jarahi with the aim of killing or arresting the remaining protesters. Many were shot randomly at close range as they attempted to flee. Many of those injured were too terrified to seek medical treatment, fearing rightly that the regime would be monitoring hospitals and pharmacies and arresting anyone seeking treatment for gunshot injuries.

Adding insult to injury, human rights activists in Ahwaz also reported that the regime is now attempting to extort money from the grieving families of its victims, charging them around \$4,000 each in order to return the bodies of their loved ones, and even charging them 'fees' for the bullets used to kill their children, parents, husbands, and wives.

A local eyewitness said, "When the regime was shooting crazily at the protesters in the nearby marshes, we could only hear the screams of children and women and young protesters. But after an hour, their voices fell silent and the next morning regime forces set fire to the reeds in the marshes. The smell of dead bodies spread. The regime vehicles came and collected the bodies and took them. When the grieving families began wading through the marshes searching for them, they only found the shreds of cloth from their sons' clothes soaked with blood, and the sound of flies gathering around the blood and the smell of burned flesh of the bodies and bloodstains on the reeds."

The eyewitness said many families had heard the injured crying out and had tried to rush to save their loved ones in the marshes area, but regime forces had fired at them, with officers using bullhorns to tell them to stay away from the marshes. Many of the injured who were too weak to flee were burnt alive.

After perpetrating these atrocities in Jarahi, the regime forces moved on to the neighboring town of Koura, five kilometers away. Eyewitnesses reported that they began by besieging the town with tanks and opened fire on the protesters blocking the road leading into the town to force them to abandon their protests and to allow the regime forces to enter. Several citizens were killed in the crossfire, and the town was subsequently besieged from Monday, November 18 to Wednesday, November 20.

A local cleric, the leader of the Friday prayers in the town, intervened and asked the IRGC not to enter the city in order to defuse tensions. Eyewitnesses said that senior IRGC officers told the cleric that they had received reports of the presence of 'ISIS' members in the town, and that they had been sent there on orders of high-ranking officials, citing Hassan Rouhani—the president of the Islamic Republic—the IRGC leadership, and National Security Council officials. The regime forces then proceeded to carry out mass killings in the town, using the supposed presence of ISIS as a pretext, although there has never been any such presence in the area.

Hamid Sheikhan (<https://www.dusc.org/en/article/4978>) is one of possibly hundreds of slain protesters, and his story emphasizes that the killing perpetuated by the regime has not stopped with the attacks themselves. Sheikhan was a 35-year-old married man with a young daughter from Koura, and was a national athletics champion in track and field. During the protests, he went to Koran Square along with other youth to participate in the protests. One of his friends recalled: "On the day of the protest, we suddenly faced large numbers of military vehicles like tanks. Hamid was angry at the presence of forces, and ran towards the tank, then took off his shirt screaming 'Look, we have no weapons, why do you come with tanks?' While he was screaming, a number of guard forces attacked him and arrested him, then took him away in a car."

While totally healthy when he was arrested on November 19, regime forces called his family on November 23 to inform them that Hamid had died from a 'heart attack' in jail. When the family retrieved the body, they say they found a string of strangulation bruises around his neck.

Regime forces also perpetrated similar atrocities against protesters in the city of Muhammarah, known as Khorramshahr in Farsi, in Abadan and Falahiyeh (also known as Shadegan), Toster (Shushtar), Ramez (Ramhormoz), and the regional capital of Ahwaz city. As elsewhere, the IRGC and the regime's infamous plainclothes Basiji militias played the leading role in terrorizing and killing the unarmed protesters, as well as in the campaign of mass arrests. Reports indicate that the number of those wounded in Ahwaz city alone has reached at least 140, and over 1000 have been arrested. Only 150 of those detained have been released, while the families of other detainees have been denied any information about their whereabouts. Some detainees have reportedly been transferred to other provinces.

Angry and frustrated activists have expressed the same sentiments when interviewed: "Ahwazi Arab people protest at this ethnic oppression—in what country does the government use tanks and machine guns to face public protests?" asked one. "But then this is the Iranian regime, the creator of the land of crimes, where they burned young Ahwazi protesters alive in the canebrake."

The regime officer's claims that the attacks were ordered by leadership officials implicate the Iranian regime in these crimes against humanity. These most recent attacks should be understood as part of the regime's systematic strategy to terrorize the region's people into acquiescence.

Even as the protests in other parts of Iran have effectively been suppressed, the thousands of wounded

demonstrators and bystanders, along with those who have been arrested without any information as to their whereabouts, are keeping the terror of repression alive in the Ahwaz region. The families of the many still imprisoned are left without hope, now fearing that they, like Hamid Sheikani's family, will receive a phone call in the middle of the night telling them that their previously healthy loved one is dead of supposedly natural causes. ❖

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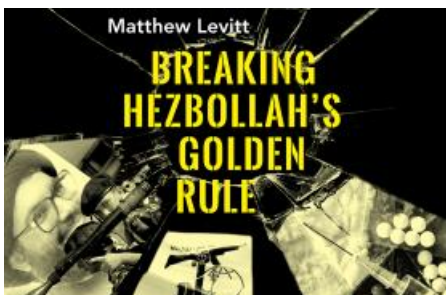
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