

Do the Ahwaz protests threaten Iran's unity?

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Brief Analysis

The recent Ahwaz protests point to broader tensions between the Iranian state and the country's minorities, and Iraqi influence within Iran.

Earlier this month, Iran attempted drone strikes on the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)—an Iranian Kurdish separatist group based mainly in the Kurdish region of Iraq. The drone strikes mirrored attacks on the KDPI in 2018, when ballistic missiles hit the KDPI's headquarters. Moreover, this follows a recent assassination of a [KDPI leader \(https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/09/03/iranian-kurdish-opposition-in-erbil-may-suffer-as-a-result-of-a-us-withdrawal/\)](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/09/03/iranian-kurdish-opposition-in-erbil-may-suffer-as-a-result-of-a-us-withdrawal/) in Erbil. Iran deems the KDPI a terrorist group and targets them accordingly, but the summer's demonstration of inter-minority solidarity within Iran and the ongoing existence of separatist groups complicate the understanding of minority identities in Iran—both those who live within and outside of the country's borders with Iraq.

At the moment, Iran is likely especially concerned about its minority populations given the protests of Ahwaz Arabs this summer. On the surface, the July protests that emerged in the Ahwaz region of Iran began in response to the diversion of the Karun River by Iranian authorities, which caused severe water shortages for the region's inhabitants. Yet the infectiousness of the Ahwaz demonstrations—and the swift crackdowns that followed—point to deeper issues in this multiethnic state; the protests were not born solely from the water diversion, nor did they arise by chance. Many Ahwaz Arabs consider themselves under Iranian occupation, and separatist movements and protests have existed in Khuzestan for decades.

Historically, the Ahwaz region shares more in common with Iraq than Iran. After the Muslim victory over the Persian Empire in the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 636 AD, Ahwaz became part of the state of Basra, and maintained this status until the Mongol invasion in 1258. Then, in 1436, an independent Arab state called Musha'sha'iyah, came into being, followed by the kingdom of the Bani Kaab tribe which ruled from 1724-1925. It was only in the early 20th century that Ahwaz came under Pahlavi authority. Notably, the Ahwaz region was an independent kingdom even during the Safavid-Ottoman conflict, and was recognized by both states.

The Ahwaz region borders the Persian Gulf, and the Iraqi governorates of Basra and Maysan. Most of its inhabitants are Arabs from well-known clans with extensions in Iraq and other Arab countries. The region is home to millions of Ahwazis, with a population larger than several Gulf states. Its inhabitants suffer from poor conditions relative to the vast wealth produced by the region. Ahwaz contains an abundance of natural resources; it is home to the majority of Iran's oil wells, as well as several large rivers—including the Karun—which create fertile land and prime conditions for agriculture. In short, Ahwaz can be described as Iran's lungs, especially given much of Iran's arid topography.

As such, the Ahwaz region is seen as a vital territory for Iran. That **demonstrations in Ahwaz** (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/07/18/the-impact-of-the-ahwaz-protests-in-iran/>) spread so quickly this summer emphasizes an underlying current of frustration that has not departed with the crackdown of the protests. Despite a statement by the authorities that the IRGC had sent water tankers and resolved the crisis, reports from human rights groups noted that the Ahwaz protests were brutally shut down, with many protesters now in Iran's notorious prisons.

The need for order here is also due to the unclear situation on Iran's border with Afghanistan, and the millions of Azeris living within Iran along the Iranian-Azerbaijani border—some of whom **expressed solidarity** (<https://twitter.com/ProfBShaffer/status/1418957860839510035>) with Ahwazi calls for independence during the July protests. This latter population is likely larger than that of Azeris living in Azerbaijan itself, and some have long been working to secede and join Azerbaijan.

Even so, many of the Arabs residing there—who make up an estimated 10% of the country's population—are searching for greater autonomy. Moreover, they are not the only minority in Iran's multiethnic state that has sought independence. In 1946, Iran's Kurdish minority, an estimated 10-15% of the population, established an independent republic in Iran's far northwest under the leadership of Qazi Muhammad and Mullah Mustafa Barzani, with support from the Soviet Union. The republic was wiped out just eleven months later, and Qazi Muhammad was executed in a public square in the city of Mahabad, but separatist movements such as the KDPI remain.

And while much is made of the influence Iran possesses inside Iraq, Iranian minorities on the border are clearly influenced by what goes on inside Iraq as well. The language used to protest the Iranian state, for example, has also emphasized the extent of the cultural similarities and tribal connections between the inhabitants of Ahwaz and southern Iraq—especially notable since Iraq's upcoming elections are raising tensions there. Slogans used in Iraq's demonstrations have been repeated in Ahwaz, including: “We sacrifice our souls and blood for you, Ahwaz,” “Whoever doesn't go out [to demonstrate] is not a man,” and “Whoever doesn't stand his ground is not Ahwazi.” Shared slogans demonstrate the linguistic and cultural connection between the Ahwaz region and the southern Iraqi governorates. It seems that the people of Ahwaz have breathed the same smoke that killed peaceful Iraqi protesters, and have memorized the November 2019 Iraqi protest slogans by heart.

However, groups operating outside of Iran may also be galvanized by this show of frustration with the regime. Perhaps the most serious ramification is the potential threat posed by the Iranian Mujahedin-e-Khalq, a group that supports unrest in Ahwaz. Founded during the Pahlavi era, the organization fought with Iraq against the Iranian regime during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. The MEK's ultimate goal is to overthrow the existing Iranian regime, and it holds significant sway and influence in the Ahwaz region.

The protests attracted other supporters as well. Unlike the MEK, which supports the protests with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the Iranian regime and controlling the government, the left-wing Kurdish Komala Party—headquartered in the KRI's Sulaymaniyah and separate from the KDPI—supported Ahwaz protests because it hopes to separate the Kurdish region from Iran and integrate its territories into an independent Kurdish state. The party spreads its ideas by exploiting fragile areas along the Iraq-Iran border, especially given the Iraqi Kurds' autonomy in Iraq and self-governance through the Kurdish Regional Government. President Raisi's previously unannounced visit

to Ahwaz in the aftermath of the protests, along with official statements that the government is attempting to remedy the water shortage, demonstrated the regime's attempts to ameliorate the situation.

While overt protest may be subdued for now, neither the water crisis nor the desire for greater autonomy have been solved. Along with an economic crisis and a severe, ongoing mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, it is clear that Iran's new president is facing significant internal problems threatening Iran's national security—and potentially its existing territorial integrity. As international and regional actors look for ways to navigate Iran's increasingly hardline attitude—exemplified by the new president—they should keep in mind Iran's minorities searching for greater autonomy, especially as they look towards Iraq, and Iran's extreme responses in repressing these groups. ❖

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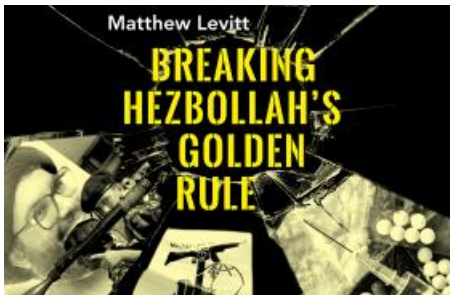
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