



Iran's Khuzestan: Thirst and Turmoil

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Principal Findings

What's new? Khuzestan, one of Iran's most resource-rich provinces and the fifth most populous, is a microcosm of the country's most serious problems. It suffers from severe environmental degradation, economic deprivation and socio-political discontent. The water scarcity that sparked protests in mid-2021 will almost certainly recur and could trigger similar unrest.

Why does it matter? The government relies on coercion and short-term remedies to quell protests, but this approach exacerbates the underlying crisis, setting up the region for more tumult.

What should be done? Increasing the involvement of ethnic minorities in local government and stepping up proactive environmental initiatives can help mitigate some of Khuzestan's deeply rooted problems. Rectifying them, however, will require fundamental political and structural economic changes that the Islamic Republic appears unwilling to make.

Executive Summary

The anti-government protests that erupted throughout Iran in September 2022 were the latest episode in a dismayingly familiar cycle: when discontent boils over in unrest, the Islamic Republic vaguely acknowledges popular concerns, perhaps even signalling measures to quiet them, but then proceeds to quash their expression with brute force and to revert to its old ways. Failing to address the underlying grievances, it sets the stage for another bloody confrontation between state and society. Nowhere is this cycle more apparent than in provinces historically mismanaged by the capital and beset with local social and environmental problems. In one such province, Khuzestan in the south west, protests have been frequent, including as part of the late 2022 nationwide movement. Yet the piecemeal government efforts to respond cannot repair the damage done by decades' worth of mismanagement, exacerbated by factors like sanctions and climate change. The necessary changes go beyond what Tehran has proven willing or able to undertake, underscoring the need for a fundamental reconsideration of how it governs.

During the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s, Khuzestan was a major battleground, symbolising the values the nascent Islamic Republic sought to inculcate: resistance, determination and sacrifice. Yet the wounds of that bitter decade have been left to fester, not by a foreign foe but by successive Iranian governments, which have drawn on the province's wealth of natural resources without efficiently investing in its development, a fact of which its population is glaringly aware. As a result, in Khuzestan today the country's most troubling fault lines are cast in sharp relief. While being one of Iran's most resource-rich provinces, it suffers from environmental degradation, reducing the supply of water, the scarcity of which sparked protests in mid-2021; socio-political dissatisfaction that reflects a broad repudiation, evident across the country, of state mismanagement and corruption; economic uncertainty and unemployment; ethnically tinged resentment among its sizeable Arab population; and, above all, government neglect despite repeated pledges to tackle growing problems.

Examining these challenges at the provincial level reveals the difficulty in addressing them. There are useful steps the government could take in Khuzestan, especially to alleviate political grievances and water scarcity. Empowering local officials, and incorporating the views of the Arab population, who at best feel left off Tehran's list of priorities and at worst suspect intentional discrimination, could help defuse the brewing trouble. More sustainable models of agriculture management, smarter resource allocation and greater consideration of problems arising from environmental degradation could mitigate the impact of worsening living conditions.

But these steps would still amount to only a partial remedy, even if they bring about a needed shift from the short-term, reactive policies that have largely characterised the state's approach to planning thus far. Khuzestan has local drivers of discontent, demonstrated in the 2021 protests over water, and also reflects grievances prevalent elsewhere in the country, as seen during the nationwide tumult in late 2022. Its experience shows that policies must address both national and provincial sources of unhappiness. The recurrence of popular unrest has led even stalwarts of the Islamic Republic to warn of the danger of continuing down a path that premises political stability on exclusion of all

but the most loyal. Events in Iran's peripheral provinces demonstrate that such exclusion does little more than perpetuate mismanagement, which in turn lays the groundwork for more frequent turbulence, rendering Iran vulnerable to the same pathologies that have caused civil strife elsewhere in the Middle East.

Ahvaz/Washington/Brussels, 21 August 2023

Iran's Khuzestan: Thirst and Turmoil

I. Introduction

In the summer of 2021, in the wake of Ebrahim Raisi's victory in Iran's presidential election, the south-western province of Khuzestan was gripped by a two-week uprising. The unrest, rooted in pent-up frustration with political stagnation and economic malaise, was triggered by severe scarcity of water.¹ The authorities eventually dispersed the demonstrations, but the president-elect had taken notice. It was no accident that Raisi broadcast his maiden address to the nation – on Nowrouz, the first day of the Persian calendar, in March 2022 – from the grand mosque in Khorramshahr, a city in Khuzestan.² Many Iranians see the sanctuary as a symbol of resistance to the Iraqi occupation of the city from 1980 to 1982.³ But there was another reason behind the choice of venue: the government felt it had to signal the intent to tackle Khuzestan's accumulating problems, if nothing else to keep the province quiet.

A year later, however, citizens' unhappiness had only deepened – not just in Khuzestan but also throughout Iran. Months of anti-government protests prompted by the death in September 2022 of a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa (Jhina) Amini, in the custody of Tehran's "morality police" had laid bare the regime's unwillingness or inability to address nationwide discontent with its repressive cultural practices and stifling restrictions on personal freedoms. The protests were particularly intense, and the state's crackdown especially violent, in the provinces, underscoring how deep the fissures between state and society run in regions the central government has long viewed as peripheral, meriting an afterthought at most with respect to investment and service provision.

Nestled on the Gulf's northern shores, abutting Iraq, Khuzestan is a microcosm of the many intersecting challenges facing the Islamic Republic. Rich in natural resources but poverty-stricken, historically verdant but increasingly parched, ground zero in the brutal eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) yet subsequently treated as literal and metaphorical fringe, the province faces financial, developmental, environmental and social challenges deriving from governance failures that make it look like a bellwether for the entire country. The protests that have repeatedly roiled Khuzestan reflect widespread discontent with local conditions, as during the 2021 water crisis, but also nationwide anger at the regime's abuses and chronic mismanagement.

On paper, Khuzestan is an engine of Iran's economy. It produces nearly 15 per cent of the country's gross domestic product; only the capital Tehran contributes more, and no other province delivers a double-digit share.⁴ Oil was discovered in Khuzestan in

¹ For more on Raisi's election, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°224, *Iran: The Riddle of Raisi*, 5 August 2021.

² "Pres. Raisi: 15th century era of Iranian nation's active role-playing, Islamic Iran's century", Islamic Republic News Agency, 20 March 2022.

³ For background on the war, see Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁴ *Iran Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, Statistical Centre of Iran, 29 April 2023, p. 850 (Persian). This figure is based on data for the Iranian year 1398, corresponding to 2019-2020.

1908. It has subsequently been synonymous with Iran's energy industry: the province is estimated to hold more than 80 per cent of the country's oil and gas reserves, and more than a third of Iran's petrochemical plants are located there.⁵ It also grows around 14 per cent of the country's agricultural output, importantly wheat, more than any other province; it has around 33 per cent of Iran's surface water; it hosts the nation's second biggest steelmaker and one of the most important commercial hubs, the Imam Khomeini seaport.⁶ These assets have helped make the province "cosmopolitan", according to scholars, a place that has long drawn migrant workers from elsewhere in Iran.⁷

Yet harsh realities underlie all this productivity. Nearly one third of Khuzestan's population live in poverty.⁸ Unemployment exceeds 12 per cent, with the real number likely much higher than the official one.⁹ Water scarcity due to factors like constant droughts and mismanagement of resources is a critical problem in Khuzestan.¹⁰ The province suffers from frequent dust storms; air pollution in Ahvaz, the provincial capital, is alarmingly high not only by national but also by global standards.¹¹ These socio-economic and environmental woes intertwine with longstanding political grievances among Khuzestan's sizeable Arab minority, who complain of discrimination and abandonment by central and local authorities.¹² The repeated bouts of unrest stem from the combination of these problems.

⁵ "Iran", U.S. Energy Information Administration, 20 July 2021; "Strategic Study of Development Issues in Khuzestan", Center for Strategic Studies, 2017 (Persian); and "82 per cent of country's oil and gas reserves are in Khuzestan", Islamic Republic News Agency, 8 November 2022 (Persian).

⁶ "Wheat explorer", Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 6 April 2022; "More than 17 million tonnes of agricultural products are produced in Khuzestan", Mehr News, 4 April 2023 (Persian); "Water Reserves of Khuzestan", Planning and Budget Organisation of Khuzestan, 2012; "Major steel producers, exports under IMIDRO review", Eghtesad Online, 24 January 2022; and "Loading, unloading of goods increases 20% at Imam Khomeini port", *Tehran Times*, 4 February 2022.

⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, local experts, April 2023. See also Hamid Dabashi, "Is it Ahvaz or Ahwaz – and what difference does it make?", Al Jazeera, 25 September 2018.

⁸ The average poverty rate in the country was 30 per cent in 2021-2022. Despite its significant contribution to the country's GDP, Khuzestan ranks 17 in having the worst poverty rates among the country's 31 provinces. "Poverty Monitoring in 2021-2022 (1400)", Iranian Labour and Social Welfare Ministry, Autumn 2022 (Persian).

⁹ In 2021-2022, the country's average unemployment rate stood at 9.2 per cent. Among the 31 provinces, Khuzestan had the third highest unemployment rate, at 12.6 per cent, and the fourth highest youth unemployment rate, at 34.4 per cent. In the same year, the suicide rate in Khuzestan was 6.06 (per 100,000 population), compared to the national average of 6.04. The murder rate in the province is 5.4, compared to the national average of 2.7. *Iran Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, op. cit., pp. 128, 189 and 550 (Persian).

¹⁰ "Iran water: What's causing the shortages?", BBC, 2 August 2021. See also Vivian Yee and Leily Nikounazar, "In Iran, some are chasing the last drops of water", *The New York Times*, 21 June 2023.

¹¹ "Poison in the haze: Documenting life under Ahvaz's oppressive orange skies", *The Guardian*, 6 January 2023. For most of 2022, Ahvaz's PM2.5 concentration, a metric used by the World Health Organisation for assessing air quality, exceeded the body's guidelines by more than sevenfold; as a whole, Iran ranked 21st in air pollution. "Air quality in Ahvaz", *IQAir*, 11 June 2023.

¹² The size of the province's Arab population is difficult to estimate in the absence of reliable public data on ethnicity. In 2021-2022, the overall number of residents was 4,994,000, making Khuzestan Iran's fifth most populous province. *Iran Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, op. cit., p. 128 (Persian). The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution estimated that nearly 34 per cent of Khuzestanians were Arabs in 2021-2022. "Iranian Arabs and an ancient pain", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 April 2018 (Persian). Arabs mainly reside in downstream areas in eastern and southern

Not all of Iran's regions contend as fiercely as Khuzestan with every one of these myriad challenges, but conditions in the province reflect many of the stresses facing the country as a whole. So long as the Islamic Republic's approach is to suppress dissent rather than address its causes, the potential for instability will only rise, especially in areas where those stresses are most acute.

This report examines the immediate and longer-term drivers of discontent in Khuzestan, which manifest most prominently in the form of recurrent anti-government protests. While it focuses on local experiences, the lessons for considering and addressing environmental, social and political strains are more broadly relevant. It is based on more than 50 interviews with experts, activists and residents in Khuzestan, former and current Iranian officials, and foreign diplomats. Women and ethnic minorities were represented among all the above categories of interlocutors. A sister report on Iran's Baluchestan will follow.

II. The “Uprising of the Thirsty”

Khuzestan has seen repeated outbreaks of violent unrest in recent years. At times, these are reverberations of nationwide protests, with those triggered by Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022 being the latest of three major rounds since late 2017.¹³ At others, such as during the 2021 water crisis that led to the province's “uprising of the thirsty”, the spark is local.

Protests over severe water shortages in Khuzestan, a risk that activists had repeatedly warned the government about, first erupted on 6 July 2021, when Arab residents of Maravnieh, a rural district near Ahvaz, gathered at the local energy ministry office, accusing the government of “manufacturing” drought by building too many dams and diverting rivers that had once allowed for abundant crop yields.¹⁴ They said the government's intent was to displace Arab farmers. Video footage of dead fish floating in the Hur al-Azim wetlands and starving buffaloes, as well as of angry farmers demanding water, flooded social media.¹⁵ On 15 July, demonstrations spread to more than seventeen cities throughout the province.¹⁶ In Shadegan, a man was killed in disputed circumstances.¹⁷ In Hamidiyeh, protesters chanted, “I am thirsty!” – a cry that became the uprising's defining slogan.¹⁸

Despite government-directed blackouts and internet slowdowns aimed at preventing news of the protests from spreading to inspire others, people in other provinces, including Isfahan, Lorestan, East Azerbaijan, Tehran and Alborz burst into the

¹³ Crisis Group Statement, “Learning the Right Lessons from Protests in Iran”, 4 December 2019.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Arab political activists, Ahvaz, October 2021. See also “Protests of Maravnieh's farmers”, video, Al Arabiya Farsi, 6 July 2021 (Persian). Protests reportedly started in Arab-majority areas and then spread throughout the province. Saeed Madani, *Water Protests in Khuzestan: A Case Study of an Uprising* (Tehran, 2022) (Persian). One of the chants was *كلا للهجرة* (“never, ever emigrate”). Crisis Group telephone interview, Ahvazi protester, April 2023. Similar protests broke out in Dasht Azadegan and Hoveyze. “‘I am thirsty!’ Water shortages compound Iran's problems”, *The New York Times*, 21 July 2021.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Khuzestan residents, March 2022–March 2023. Hur al-Azim is a marshland that straddles the Iran–Iraq border. For footage of dead fish and overheated buffalo, see “Gradual death in Hur al-Azim”, Islamic Republic News Agency, 1 July 2021. A local farmer said, “Buffalo don't have lymph nodes. The only way they can cool themselves down is to go into the water. If they can't, they feel like they're being burned alive”. Crisis Group interview, Hoveyze, March 2023. “Energy minister: This summer is the direst in 50 years”, BBC Persian, 18 May 2021.

¹⁶ The protests' geographic spread was unprecedented. Previous unrest in the province had usually been centred in one or two cities or the Ahvaz slums. “Iran: Deadly Repression of Khuzestan Protests”, Human Rights Watch, 29 July 2021.

¹⁷ Omid Sabripour, Shadegan's acting county executive at the time, claimed that “rioters started shooting in the air to provoke people, and unfortunately one of the bullets hit a person present there, killing him”. Quoted in “Iran protests: One killed in water crisis demonstration”, BBC, 17 July 2021. Eyewitnesses rejected that claim, saying the regime had fired upon them.

¹⁸ One clip that went viral showed a woman in the city of Susangerd shouting at the security forces: “These are peaceful protests. Why do you open fire [on us]? They haven't deprived you of your land and water. Listen! We just want our land and water”. Quoted in “Susangerd's night of horror”, Eghtesad News, 29 July 2021 (Persian). Hashtags such as #KhuzestanIsThirsty and #KhuzestanHasNoWater were trending on social media. Maziar Motamedi, “Violence escalates in water-shortage protests in Iran's Khuzestan”, Al Jazeera, 21 July 2021.

streets in solidarity with their compatriots in Khuzestan.¹⁹ The demonstrations, which assumed an increasingly anti-regime tone, lasted for two weeks, as the government responded with deadly force.²⁰ Human rights activists say security forces killed six protesters and arrested at least 361 more during this period.²¹

The crackdown occurred in parallel with professions of sympathy and promises of reform from the government. “People are expressing their feelings. One cannot blame them for that”, said Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on 23 July. “If the necessary measures [on waste removal and water shortages] had been adopted ... this situation would definitely not have arisen”.²² President Hassan Rouhani and President-elect Raisi each issued a statement.²³ Rouhani’s deputy visited the province, where he had a contentious meeting with tribal leaders.²⁴ Raisi, who took office on 5 August, made a point of visiting Khuzestan in his first trip to a province as president, accompanied by a coterie of cabinet ministers.²⁵ Yet the recurrence of demonstrations since then, either local or as part of nationwide movements, suggests that grievances will continue to simmer, both in Khuzestan and around the country.²⁶

Khuzestan has a long history of popular protest. In 2000, demonstrators gathered in Abadan to decry shortages of drinking water; local authorities responded forcefully, reportedly causing several deaths and making at least 150 arrests.²⁷ In 2005, security

¹⁹ A former reformist lawmaker, using the Persian hashtag #KhuzestanIsNotAlone, tweeted, “The people of Khuzestan don’t [deserve] bullets. They acted as shields against bullets during the [Iran-Iraq] war”. Tweet by Mahmoud Sadeghi, @mah_sadeghi, former Iranian parliament member, 4:40pm, 18 July 2021 (Persian). A study of 261 videos from the demonstrations concluded that 82 per cent featured no act of violence by the protesters. Some 15 per cent showed protesters throwing rocks or setting tires on fire. Madani, *Water Protests in Khuzestan*, op. cit.

²⁰ “Iran: Deadly Repression of Khuzestan Protests”, op. cit.

²¹ “The Uprising of the Thirsty: An Analysis of the 2021 Khuzestan Protests”, Human Rights Activists in Iran, 8 November 2021. Almost all the detainees were men. Women protested as well, but they were significantly fewer in number than men due to patriarchal norms among Khuzestani Arabs. Madani, *Water Protests in Khuzestan*, op. cit., pp. 8-9 and 128-130. Women were mainly involved in other types of activism, such as raising awareness about environmental issues through art or online campaigning. Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2023.

²² Quoted in “Khuzestan problems should be addressed according to Leader’s directive: Rouhani”, *Tehran Times*, 24 July 2021. Later, Ayatollah Khamenei’s official Instagram account quoted him asking government officials to pay attention to Khuzestan’s water problems five years before the riots took place. “Khuzestan protests: Ayatollah Khamenei’s reaction on Instagram”, Radio Free Europe, 21 July 2021 (Persian).

²³ “People have the right to be frustrated with water shortages”, Islamic Republic News Agency, 19 July 2021 (Persian).

²⁴ Eshaq Jahangiri, Iran’s then-vice president, admitted that ill-conceived development projects in the province had backfired. He apologised for the failures. “Tribal leaders and Khuzestan’s elite harshly criticised Jahangiri”, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 24 July 2021 (Persian); “Jahangiri: The water behind the dams belongs to the people of Khuzestan”, Islamic Republic News Agency, 23 July 2021 (Persian).

²⁵ “President Raisi pays surprise visit to Khuzestan province”, Islamic Republic News Agency, 27 August 2021.

²⁶ In the 2021-2022 Iranian fiscal year, the government’s per capita current expenditure and investment in Khuzestan ranked 18 out of the country’s 31 provinces, while being the fifth in population size. Iran Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400), Statistical Centre of Iran, pp. 128, 741 and 746 (Persian).

²⁷ The 2000 water protests in Abadan were the first major unrest in Khuzestan since the Iran-Iraq war. “Three reported killed in Iran unrest”, Agence France Presse, 6 July 2000; “Iran report: July

forces reportedly killed dozens and arrested hundreds in clashes following the publication of a 1999 letter, posted on the internet and attributed to President Mohammad Khatami's chief of staff (which the administration maintained was a fabrication), outlining plans to alter the province's demography by transferring Arabs out and non-Arabs in.²⁸ Repression triggered several bombings, which authorities attributed to separatists.²⁹

In the following years, unrest in Khuzestan continued almost with the regularity of a metronome, particularly over environmental and economic concerns. In 2015, people protested the government's failure to respond to health risks deriving from increasingly frequent dust storms.³⁰ In 2017, students took to the streets in Ahvaz to express their frustration with power blackouts, which led, inter alia, to a lack of air conditioning while they were trying to prepare for exams.³¹ In 2018, residents of Abadan and Khorramshahr demonstrated over water shortages, leading to clashes with the police.³² During the November 2019 nationwide protests sparked by an abrupt fuel price hike, almost 60 of the 324 documented deaths occurred in Khuzestan.³³

The collapse of the commercial Metropol building under construction in downtown Abadan, which killed at least 43 and injured more than three dozen, sparked protests again in May 2022.³⁴ Popular outrage stemmed from a sense that gross negligence and endemic corruption had caused the tragedy.³⁵ What added fuel to the fire of public fury was the state's response to the catastrophe: from sluggish crisis management and immediate deployment of anti-riot police in anticipation of protests to the Supreme

17, 2000", Radio Free Europe, 17 July 2000; and "From Abadan 2000 to Joghtay 2018: Even people's deaths did not bring attention to the crisis", Entekhab, 1 January 2018 (Persian).

²⁸ "Ethnic Arabs clash with Iran military", Al Jazeera, 16 April 2005; and "Iran: Reports of Ethnic Violence Suppressed", Human Rights Watch, 9 May 2005. In 2011, dozens were killed and hundreds arrested on the anniversary of the 2005 protests. "Iran Arab Minority Protests Deaths Must Be Investigated", Amnesty International, 19 April 2011; "Iran: Investigate Reported Killings of Demonstrators", Human Rights Watch, 29 April 2011.

²⁹ "Bombings rock Iran ahead of election", *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 2005; Bill Samii, "Bombings may be connected with minorities", Radio Free Europe, 13 June 2005; "7 bombings shatter Iran's pre-election calm, killing 10", *The New York Times*, 13 June 2005; and "Bombings in Iran kill 6, injure 46", *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 2006.

³⁰ "Unprecedented dust storm sparks protests in western Iran", *The Guardian*, 10 February 2015.

³¹ Tweet by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, @RadioFarda_Eng, 11:48am, 16 June 2017.

³² "Protest over water scarcity turns violence in southwestern Iran", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 July 2018.

³³ "Iran: Details of 324 Deaths in Crackdown on November 2019 Protests", Amnesty International, 16 November 2021. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps members allegedly killed 40 to 100 demonstrators – mostly unarmed young men – in a marsh near the city of Mahshahr where they had sought refuge. Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, "With brutal crackdown, Iran is convulsed by worst unrest in 40 years", *The New York Times*, 3 December 2019. A senior Iranian official contended that the group hiding in the marshes had fired mortars at security forces first. Crisis Group interview, Doha, December 2019.

³⁴ "43 dead bodies in Abadan Metropol incident identified", Islamic Republic News Agency, 8 June 2022 (Persian); and "Protests over deadly building collapse expose rising anger at Iran's clerical establishment", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 June 2022.

³⁵ Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iranian anger at corruption intensifies after fatal building collapse", *Financial Times*, 31 May 2022; and "Collapse of Abadan's Metropol: A predicted tragedy", video, BBC Persian, 23 May 2022.

Leader's three-day delay in issuing condolences and the administration's announcement of just one day of national mourning one week after the incident.³⁶ People in other provinces again held rallies in solidarity with Khuzestan.³⁷

The September 2022 nationwide protests triggered by Mahsa Amini's death in detention also spread to Khuzestan, leading to clashes with security forces. Izeh, an impoverished city in the province's north east whose majority group is the Bakhtiyari tribe, made headlines in November after security forces fatally shot at least seven people, including three children.³⁸ Kian Pirfalak, a nine-year-old boy, lost his life when troops allegedly opened fire on his family's car in the city centre.³⁹ The government blamed "terrorists" for exploiting the protests to fuel anti-regime sentiment and firing machine guns at both civilians and security forces in the area.⁴⁰ Despite the conflicting accounts, protesters recognised Kian, one of the youngest victims, as a martyr of the 2022 protests. Home videos depicting his childhood innocence went viral, turning him into a symbol.⁴¹

³⁶ "Why rescue response to Metropol incident is slow", Etemad Online, 27 May 2022 (Persian); and "Deployment of anti-riot police around collapsed tower of Abadan; 'curfew announced in city centre'", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 23 May 2022 (Persian). Four days after the incident, while rescue teams were still recovering bodies from the debris, a state-sponsored ceremony took place in Tehran at which 100,000 attendees sang "Hail to Commander", a pop song aimed at indoctrinating youth. The event added to popular anger, as many citizens were mourning the dead in Khuzestan. "From Cinema Rex to Metropol, Iranians have had enough", Atlantic Council, 8 June 2022.

³⁷ "Iranian security forces tear-gas protesters after building collapse", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 28 May 2022.

³⁸ "Iranian protesters attack Khomeini's childhood home as unrest spreads", *The New York Times*, 18 November 2022; and "What's going on in Izeh", Radio Zamaneh, 24 December 2022 (Persian).

³⁹ "Kian Pirfalak's funeral ceremony: Shocking details from his mother: 'They lie that it was the terrorists, they [ie, security forces] fired at our car'", BBC Persian, 18 November 2022.

⁴⁰ Eyewitnesses contend that after security forces fired tear gas at the protesters, some ran away, while others threw stones at security forces. Kian was caught in the crossfire. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Izeh residents, April 2023. See also "An assessment of government supporters' narrative of the killing of Kian Pirfalak", Factnameh, 24 November 2022 (Persian).

⁴¹ Later in November, Iranian authorities reported the arrest of more than four dozen individuals in relation to Izeh's "terrorist attack". A court convicted the main suspects and handed down three death sentences. But Kian's parents insist that the shooter was a member of the security forces. "Kian Pirfalak's father: I have no complaint against Mujahid Korkuri, because the security forces fired at us", BBC Persian, 11 April 2023.

III. Sources of Grievance

The recurrence of protest in Khuzestan underscores the fundamental disconnect between the Iranian state and the citizenry, while the increasing frequency of unrest suggests that the gap is widening. People's grievances are rooted in the same socio-political discontent seen elsewhere in Iran but compounded by local factors.

Government pledges to address Khuzestan's challenges are as longstanding as they are unfulfilled. There are parallels to the economic and ethnic discontent seen in other peripheral provinces, as well as echoes of the dissatisfaction voiced throughout the 2022-2023 nationwide protests. What makes Khuzestan's experience noteworthy, as a prelude and possible warning sign, is the multiplicity of fault lines, the repeated government commitments to fix the province's problems and its failure to deliver on those promises. These three factors combine to suggest that the system can suppress open dissent temporarily, at best. At worst, it will face more regular, more determined and more confrontational rounds of protest.

A. *Mismanagement*

Successive Iranian governments since the 1979 revolution have failed to give proper attention to economic development in Khuzestan and other far-flung provinces. The centre-periphery gap is evident in a variety of indices – from poverty to unemployment, which creates a ring of relative deprivation in western, northern and especially south-eastern Iran.⁴² But in Khuzestan the discrepancy is greater because the province entered the post-revolutionary era having sustained such great damage.

The culprit was the Iran-Iraq war, which ground on from 1980 to 1988. Khuzestan was devastated, with hundreds of thousands of residents displaced.⁴³ The leadership in Tehran never ceases to praise the people of Khuzestan for their sacrifices on the nation's behalf, but the latter claim it has not done enough to help them recover.⁴⁴ In

⁴² The Iranian Labour and Social Welfare Ministry's 2021-2022 ranking, using a combination of indices, including poverty and household income and expenditure, confirms significant regional disparities. While major central provinces like Tehran, Alborz and Semnan stand among the least deprived, border provinces, some with considerable ethnic minorities, fare poorly. Khuzestan is the nineteenth most deprived of the 31 provinces. "Poverty Monitoring in 2021-2022 (1400)", op. cit.; and "What are the most deprived provinces of Iran?", *Farday-e-Eghtesad*, 9 January 2023 (Persian). For more on the core-periphery model of development in Iran, see Mirghasem Banihashemi, "Models of Building the Centre and Trends of Regional Development (the Case Study of Iran)", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 23, no. 88 (2020) (Persian); and Jamal Fatholahi et al., "Development Gap in Provinces of Iran", *Journal of Development, Economics and Planning*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2017).

⁴³ The Iran-Iraq war started when the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, sent his forces into Khuzestan in September 1980, hoping to deal a fatal blow to Iran's fledgling revolutionary government by attacking its oil industry. Hussein wrongly surmised that the province's Arabs would side with the invaders. According to a study, 60 per cent of Abadan, 88 per cent of Khoramshahr and 100 per cent of Hoveyzeh were destroyed in the war. Iraqi forces attacked Abadan and Ahvaz 1,017 and 316 times, respectively. Ahmad Pourahmad, "Reconstruction of War-torn Areas in Khuzestan Province from a Geographical Perspective", *Journal of Literature and Social Science at Tehran University*, vol. 146 (1998) (Persian).

⁴⁴ According to a 2020 survey conducted in a city that was completely destroyed during the Iran-Iraq war, 92 per cent of the residents deemed the government's assistance as insufficient. Mohammad Ebrahim Mazhari and Ali Hosseini, "An Assessment of the Level of Satisfaction with Post-war Recon-

2006, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that the government had deliberately avoided investing in Khuzestan's western areas, on the Gulf coast and along the Iraqi border, for nearly two decades after the war, as it feared that conflict with Iraq might resume, undoing any progress made.⁴⁵ Landmines also littered the province, further hampering reconstruction.⁴⁶

Where Tehran did encourage development, it either mismanaged the ventures or aimed primarily to exploit the region's natural riches with no regard for environmental or social consequences.⁴⁷ Post-revolutionary Iran incorporated environmental protection in its constitution, but every single one of its governments has failed to enforce the rules or hold those who violated them accountable.⁴⁸ The law is also silent on the social impact of development projects.⁴⁹

One example is the government's rapid expansion of sugarcane fields through large-scale land confiscation or purchase, which forced many farmers and agricultural workers into nearby slums, where they had to eke out a living in near-destitution alongside people displaced by the Iran-Iraq war.⁵⁰ As Jasem Shadid Zadeh, a former representative of Ahvaz in parliament, noted:

struction (the Case of Rofaye, Khuzestan)", *Iranian Journal of Housing and Rural Environment*, vol. 174 (Spring 2020) (Persian). See also Kaveh Ehsani, "War and Resentment: Critical Reflections on the Legacies of the Iran-Iraq War", *Middle East Critique*, vol. 26, issue 1 (2017); and Kaveh Ehsani and Rasmus Christian Elling, "Abadan: The Rise and Demise of an Oil Metropolis", *Middle East Report*, no. 287 (2018).

⁴⁵ "Ahmadinejad announced: Revocation of the Supreme National Security Council's edict on Khuzestan", *Alef*, 2 January 2006 (Persian).

⁴⁶ Leila Alikarami, "Iran-Iraq War continues to claim lives", *Al-Monitor*, 4 April 2018.

⁴⁷ A former representative of Ahvaz in parliament said, "The government's stance toward Khuzestan has historically been one of plunder, regardless of whether it is reformist or conservative". Crisis Group telephone interview, Mohammad Kianush Rad, March 2022. In 2021, more than 300 activists, scholars and journalists called for the government to be held accountable for its "failure" and "incompetence", which they said had caused water shortages, power outages, air pollution, inflation, unemployment and other problems. "A statement by Iranian civil and political activists on the protests in Khuzestan", *Emtedad*, 22 July 2021 (Persian).

⁴⁸ "Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s constitution of 1979 with amendments through 1989, Article 50", *Constitute Project*, 27 April 2022. An environmental expert contended that weak law enforcement stems from nebulous lines of responsibility. "For example, with regard to water, when it is behind the dams, responsibility lies with the energy ministry; when it is in the pipes, responsibility lies with the health ministry; and when it enters rivers and lakes, the environmental agency is in charge". Quoted in "Violations of Article 50 in all governments", *Mehr News*, 24 July 2019 (Persian). Other government bodies sometimes veto the environmental agency's assessments. In 2021, for instance, parliament approved a water transfer project over the agency's opposition. "Earmarking budget for transferring water to Iran's central plateau despite the environmental agency's opposition", *Tasnim News*, 13 December 2021 (Persian). There are also numerous cases in which the judiciary has overturned the agency's bans on projects. "Deputy of the environmental agency: We're against water transfer", *Mehr News*, 4 May 2020 (Persian).

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Iranian sociologists and analysts, Tehran, February-November 2022.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and residents, Khuzestan, February 2022. There is no reliable public data on confiscated or purchased lands by the government, but one indication of its scale is a claim by a former Khuzestan parliamentarian that in the 1990s the government's development plans led to the confiscation of over 120,000 hectares; human rights groups noted that in this and other instances, "land has reportedly been expropriated without consultation or adequate compensation and as such amounts to forced eviction". See "Land confiscation and population transfer: Appeal

The sugarcane industry in the province alone destroyed more than 700 Arab villages and replaced thousands of self-reliant Arab farmers with workers from other provinces, turning them into slum dwellers struggling with unemployment and drug addiction.⁵¹

The waste removal system in Ahvaz is another case in point. It allows raw sewage to pour into the Karun river from 24 different points, polluting the waterway and its environs.⁵² Water treatment and supply remain appallingly inadequate despite the allocation of hundreds of millions of dollars in international and state support.⁵³ “Years of neglect cannot be rectified overnight”, a local official in Ahvaz lamented, ignoring the fact that successive Iranian governments have failed to resolve this particular challenge.⁵⁴ Others put the blame on Western sanctions that deprive Iran of access to foreign investment and technology.⁵⁵

The May 2022 collapse of the Metropol building in Abadan put corruption on tragic display, along with Khuzestan's deep distrust of the government. Construction had proceeded despite warnings from engineers, primarily because the municipality had a financial stake in the building and its owner, Hossein Abdolbaghi, was well connected among Khuzestan's officialdom.⁵⁶ Abdolbaghi reportedly died when the building fell down, but on social media accusations flew that authorities had faked his death to avoid accountability.⁵⁷ State-run outlets have since reported that 21 people associated with the Metropol have been sentenced to three years in prison on involuntary manslaughter and negligent assault charges, including the serving mayor, two former mayors and engineers supervising the project.⁵⁸

case”, Amnesty International, 17 May 2006. Also see, “Ahvaz representative's criticism of the authorities regarding the confiscation of agricultural lands”, Young Journalist Club, 12 April 2016 (Persian); “Confiscation of agricultural lands in two Arab villages”, Gooya News, 8 April 2012 (Persian); and “They bought our land under the condition of employment, but they hired non-local forces”, Tabnak, 2 December 2017 (Persian).

⁵¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2021. According to Iranian officials, Khuzestan has the worst trend of drug addiction in the country. “Khuzestan ranks first in the country's addiction trend”, Drug Control Headquarters, 29 January 2017 (Persian).

⁵² “Emergence of a variety of diseases in Abadan and Khoramshahr because of sewage in drinking water”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 October 2021 (Persian).

⁵³ “Iran: Ahwaz and Shiraz water supply and sanitation project”, World Bank, 6 May 2004; “Two parliamentary investigations into expending national development fund's grants on water and sewage projects in Khuzestan”, Fars News, 2 August 2021 (Persian); and Sina Ghanbarpour, “9 kids killed and 30 years of psychological and physical damage did not fix Ahvaz's sewage system”, BBC Persian, 4 May 2023.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, June 2023.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, members of parliament and city council, Tehran and Abadan, June 2023.

⁵⁶ The problems with the Metropol were hardly a secret while it was being built. In 2020, after talking to engineers supervising the construction, Saeed Hafezi, an Iranian journalist now living in Germany, posted a video online saying the building would collapse. Tweet by Saeed Hafezi, @SaeedHafezi631, 6:02am, 23 May 2022. See also Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Corruption cases tarnish image of Iran's hard-line president”, *Washington Post*, 13 July 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Khuzestan residents, May-June 2022.

⁵⁸ “Iran's judiciary sentences 21 people over Metropol tower disaster”, IranWire, 31 August 2022; and “Details of Metropol verdicts announced”, Mizan, 31 August 2022 (Persian).

Specific cases aside, statistics paint a picture of government failure across the board in the province where the majority of Iran's oil originates.⁵⁹ Khuzestan has an official unemployment rate of 12.6 per cent, which is equivalent to a 219,000-strong "army of unemployed people", as the head of the provincial planning organisation puts it.⁶⁰ Of the province's nearly five million residents, at least 800,000 live in slums.⁶¹ A patchwork of ethnicities, Khuzestan scores low on social cohesion.⁶² Reflecting widespread despondency about the future, three in four young Khuzestanians reportedly want to leave for other parts of the country.⁶³

Local officials say poor administration is at the root of Khuzestan's problems. As Khamenei's representative in Khuzestan conceded, "It's not that insufficient resources have been allocated to the province, but that they were wasted through mismanagement, causing bigger problems".⁶⁴ A former official wondered if "the water crisis would have been so calamitous if the government had literally done nothing".⁶⁵

In July 2021, amid protests in Khuzestan, President-elect Raisi unprecedentedly vowed to appoint a "special governor" with enhanced authority to address the province's accumulated problems.⁶⁶ A month after he took office, he named Sadegh Kha-

⁵⁹ According to Iran's inspector-general, the government transferred just 40, 20 and 12 per cent of Khuzestan's allocated oil revenue share to the province in 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively. "In people's name, in officials' pockets", *Mizan*, 11 January 2021 (Persian).

⁶⁰ Of these people, 94,000 are highly educated. Mehrdad Nikoo, quoted in "Two-digit unemployment", *Ayandehnegar*, vol. 111 (August 2021), p. 63 (Persian). The national unemployment rate, per the government's data, stood at 9.2 per cent in 2021-2022.

⁶¹ Half these people (ie, around 400,000) live on the outskirts of Ahvaz, the provincial capital, making it the city with the second-highest number of slum dwellers in the country after Mashhad. "800,000 people in Khuzestan are slum dwellers", Islamic Republic News Agency, 1 January 2022 (Persian); and "Ahvaz has the second-highest number of slum dwellers after Mashhad", Islamic City Council of Ahvaz, 8 May 2023 (Persian). Khuzestan's rank in terms of urban households' per capita expenditure dropped from seventh to sixteenth between 2016-2021. "Summary of Income and Expenditure of Urban and Rural Households in 1395 (2016-2017)", Statistical Centre of Iran, 2017 (Persian); and "Summary of Income and Expenditure of Urban and Rural Households in 1400 (2021-2022)", Statistical Centre of Iran, 2022 (Persian).

⁶² Crisis Group telephone interviews, former city council member, Ahvaz, February 2022; Iranian sociologists, Tehran, June 2022-March 2023.

⁶³ According to the Statistical Centre of Iran, between 2011 and 2016, the number of people who left Khuzestan was around 80,000 more than the number who came in, the highest level of net negative migration among the country's 31 provinces. "Examining the Characteristics of Migrants and Non-Migrants between 1390-1395 (2011-2016)", Statistical Centre of Iran, 2019 (Persian). A 2021 survey shows that among Khuzestani youth, 74.8 and 77.5 per cent, respectively, of young men and women want to leave their home province. Leyla Mehdad, "Dust compels out-migration from Khuzestan", *Shahrvand Online*, 5 December 2021 (Persian).

⁶⁴ Mohammad Nabi Mousavifard quoted in "Khuzestan's problems are rooted in mismanagement", *Tasnim News*, 9 September 2021 (Persian). See also "Why did Khuzestan rank last in the interior ministry's rankings?", *Tasnim News*, 17 October 2020 (Persian); "Water mismanagement in Khuzestan is the cause of many problems", *Mizan*, 20 July 2021 (Persian); and "Speaker of the parliament: We have no answer to mismanagement in Khuzestan", Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting News Agency, 27 July 2021 (Persian).

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Abadan, June 2023.

⁶⁶ "From order of forming 'strategic council' to necessity of appointing 'special governor' for Khuzestan", *dolat.ir*, 22 July 2021 (Persian). Additionally, the General Inspection Organisation of Iran appointed a new general inspector for the province "with exceptional authority", such as issuing warrants to arrest

lilian, an Ahvaz-born former agriculture minister, as the special governor, affording him the distinct rights to attend cabinet meetings and contact ministers directly.⁶⁷ Months later, however, residents reported seeing little change on the ground.⁶⁸ Little surprise, then, that when Iran was engulfed in a nationwide uprising in the latter half of 2022, Khuzestan exploded as well.

B. *Ethnic and Gender Discrimination*

Khuzestan's ethnic minorities, especially its Arab population, view what is considered mismanagement elsewhere in Iran as systematic and even deliberate discrimination against them. Many Arabs believe that the government purposely neglects the province's environmental woes to force them to abandon their lands.⁶⁹ The spark for the 2021 protests was a fiery speech by Sheikh Khalaf al-Mahalhel, the chief of the (Arab) Maravneh tribe, who accused the government of using drought to force Arab farmers to relocate.⁷⁰ The leader of the Bani Turuf, one of the largest Arab tribes in Khuzestan, echoed the allegation, urging people to protest.⁷¹

Perceptions of such nefarious designs in Tehran run deep among Khuzestan's Arabs.⁷² As evidence, Arab activists cite an alleged Supreme National Security Council

those suspected of economic crimes. "Inspector general of Khuzestan appointed 'with special authority'", Iranian Students' News Agency, 15 September 2021 (Persian).

⁶⁷ "Sadegh Khalilian elected as governor of Khuzestan", *dolat.ir*, 5 September 2021 (Persian); and "Interior minister: Khuzestan's governor has special authority", Islamic Republic News Agency, 9 September 2021 (Persian).

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Khuzestan, March-June 2022. See also "Is Khalilian really 'special'?", *Aftab-e Yazd*, 7 September 2021 (Persian); and "Authorities should do something for Khuzestan / Special governor supposed to have authority at vice president level", Iranian Labour News Agency, 9 May 2022 (Persian). Eight months after Khalilian's appointment, protests erupted in Khuzestani cities, and then spread to other provinces, after prices of food staples skyrocketed due to revised subsidies. "First signs of civil unrest as bread prices soar in Iran", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 May 2022. A social media activist criticised the special governor's appointment as part of "reactive approach" that had failed for 40 years, adding: "Governance requires rationality in planning and ... consistency in implementation. ... Khuzestan is not special". Tweet by Morteza Kia, @Kiamorteza, social media activist, 1:33pm, 22 July 2021 (Persian). Khalilian lasted in his post for a mere sixteen months.

⁶⁹ Protest slogans included: "No to forced displacement", "We will stay" and "We will not leave our ancestors' lands". Crisis Group observations, Khuzestan, July 2021. An activist said, "The central government is clearly pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing to drive Arabs from Khuzestan". Crisis Group interview, Susangerd, July 2021. An Arab farmer took issue with the argument that Khuzestan's crisis is simply the result of mismanagement: "The government is not dysfunctional. It's very smart and practical, because it can build all these dams and projects to deprive us of water and dry up our land. Is building all these dams and transferring water to other provinces a sign of a dysfunctional government?" Crisis Group interview, Khuzestan, October 2021.

⁷⁰ "Arabs should resist the government's plan to uproot them from their ancestral lands", he declared. Crisis Group interviews, activists, Ahvaz, July 2021.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Khuzestani protesters, Ahvaz, July 2021.

⁷² A Tehran University sociologist said, "Claims about the government's plan for changing the region's demography are a reflection of ethnic grievances and reveal the deep mistrust between Arabs and the government". Crisis Group telephone interview, February 2022. For more on such perceptions, see Ali Jenadleh, "Khuzestan Protests: A Peripheral Perspective", Iranian Sociological Association, 2 August 2021 (Persian); and Abdolreza Navah and Khieri Hiedari, "Ethnic Identity and the Sense of Social Exclusion among Arab People in Ahvaz", *Journal of Cultural and Social Strategies* (2016) (Persian).

document that came to light in April 2016.⁷³ The document is unverified and may be fake, but many consider it authentic and resent the ethnic bias they believe it represents.

Khuzestani Arabs feel that their ethnicity puts them at an economic disadvantage. Iranian scholars often attribute the inequality between centre and periphery to “uneven development”, as wealth and power are concentrated in the central provinces, leaving the peripheral ones less developed in comparison.⁷⁴ But many Arabs see an explicitly ethnic dimension. A Khuzestani analyst said, “The Arabs compare their quality of life with that of their counterparts in other provinces and Gulf Arab states. In light of perceived economic inequalities, the ethnic framework has become a cognitive scheme for the Arab minority to make sense of their lives”.⁷⁵

Lack of job opportunities, particularly in government and state-owned enterprises, is a key grievance.⁷⁶ Complaining that oil and sugarcane companies hire too few locals, contributing to Khuzestan’s high unemployment rate, a former provincial representative of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Mousavi Jazaieri, noted, “It’s disconcerting to see government officials disregard the disastrous consequences of decision-making, alienating our Arab people from the Islamic Republic, paving the way for enemies to invest in the disaffection of our people”.⁷⁷ As a Khuzestani activist put it:

We live in one of the wealthiest lands on earth. [We have] oil, gas, fertile land, water, everything. Our ancestors lived here with dignity for hundreds of years. But our generation has nothing but tremendous poverty, polluted air, contaminated water and scores of [related] diseases. In Mahshahr [in south-eastern Khuzestan], the government built dozens of oil refineries and petrochemical plants, and dozens of luxury settlements for non-Arab staff arriving from outside Khuzestan, while Arab people are living in dirt just a few kilometres away.⁷⁸

There are other points of contention. One is the lack of mother-tongue education for Khuzestani Arabs.⁷⁹ As a teacher pointed out, “Beginning schooling in Persian is a form of institutional discrimination for young students who have never spoken the language

⁷³ The alleged document, titled the Inclusive Security Plan for Khuzestan Province, was supposedly signed in June 2014 by Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, who was then interior minister. “Confidential document: ‘Khuzestan Security Comprehensive Plan’”, *Al Arabiya*, 2 April 2016 (Persian). The government has issued no reaction to these reports.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, local experts, April 2023. See also Hamid Reza Jalaiepour, “On Ethnic Inequality in Iran”, in Mirtaher Mousavi, ed., *The Second Report on Iran’s Social Status: Social Unity and Inequality Between 2009 and 2017* (Tehran, 2019), pp. 49–62 (Persian); and “Ethnic federalism or balanced development”, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 18 July 2020 (Persian).

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ahvaz, February 2022.

⁷⁶ During the period between 2013 and 2017, only 7.2 per cent of local officials in Khuzestan were Arabs. “Strategic Study of Development Issues in Khuzestan”, op. cit. Khuzestani Arabs have, however, reached senior positions among the leadership in Tehran. Examples include Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, and the vice president for economic affairs, Mohsen Rezaei. See also “Strange unemployment rate in Mahshahr”, *Mehr News*, 29 December 2020 (Persian).

⁷⁷ “Speech by the Iranian supreme leader’s representative in Khuzestan”, video, Aparat, October 2018 (Persian).

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Khuzestan, October 2021.

⁷⁹ Other ethnic minorities in Iran, such as Azeris and Kurds, share this sentiment. See Rasmus Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York, 2013).

before”.⁸⁰ People also voice demands for starting Arabic-language publications, opening space for Arab civil society organisations and renaming cities in the original Arabic.⁸¹

Minorities see few ways to bring about positive change. Khuzestan has eighteen representatives in the 290-seat Iranian parliament, some of them Arabs, but they say they have trouble delivering for their constituents, since Tehran favours central provinces.⁸² The regime has, in effect, barred Khuzestani Arabs from creating political parties or advocacy groups of their own, and international human rights groups have noted that the government harasses civil society activists in the province, accusing them of links to separatism or terrorism.⁸³ Khuzestan is not the only peripheral region to suffer such problems: civic organisation is stifled in most.

Women's rights activists, meanwhile, say the province's economic challenges harm women more than men.⁸⁴ The unemployment rate for university-educated Khuzestani women averaged 60.8 per cent in the period 2017-2019, above the national average of 58.7 per cent.⁸⁵ The situation is worse for women with little formal education or vocational training. An activist claimed that the difficulty of finding a job forces many women into sex work, which in turn has significantly increased violence against women, including so-called honour killings.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ahvaz, March 2022.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, activists and analysts, Ahvaz, March 2022. An Arab activist said, “The province's name was once Arabistan, due to this history and the large Arab population. The government seeks to erase that past through the renaming of cities and villages”. Crisis Group interview, director of a non-profit group for protecting Arab culture in Ahvaz, February 2022. Echoing this view, another activist said, “The region has an Arab history. The cultural heritage of Arab communities, their music, traditions and history, has been neglected. Even the fact that a strong Arab Shiite dynasty, the Mushashian, ruled the province for more than 500 years is absent from Iran's official historical narratives”. Crisis Group interview, Ahvaz, March 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Tehran University sociologist, former MP, Tehran, February and June 2022. On democratic shortcomings, see Abbas Abdi, “Khuzestan: Where should one start”, *Etemaad*, 24 July 2021 (Persian). As one Khuzestani parliamentarian put it, “When I pursue the people's demands, I'm accused of pursuing an ethnic agenda. But I tackle these issues because I care about my country's security”. Discussing what he described as disproportionately low representation of Arabs at both national and provincial levels, he said, “That there is discrimination is undeniable. ... When I, as a representative of the people, raise their issues, I am accused of pursuing an ethnic agenda”. Ali Sari, quoted in “Ahvaz's unrest is rooted in discrimination”, *Ensaf News*, 5 April 2018 (Persian).

⁸³ Following bombings in Ahvaz in 2005-2006, the government banned the first and only major legal Arab party for “confronting the Islamic Republic” and “creating unrest and tension between ... Arabs and Persians”. See “Arab party banned in Khuzestan”, *BBC Persian*, 4 November 2006. For examples of government crackdowns on Arab activists, see “Iran: Sweeping Arrests of Ahwazi Arab Activists”, *Amnesty International*, 28 April 2015; and “Iran: Hundreds Arrested in Vicious Crackdown on Ahwazi Arabs”, *Amnesty International*, 2 November 2018.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Ahvaz, July 2022.

⁸⁵ Elnaz Mohammadi, “The Hellish Days of Karun's Women”, *Andisheh Pouya*, vol. 77 (December 2021) (Persian). Women's participation in Khuzestan's labour force is 11.4 per cent, six times lower than the figure for men. The women's unemployment rate in the province stands at 23 per cent, more than twice that of men, though 2 per cent lower than the national average. *Khuzestan Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, Statistical Centre of Iran, p. 160 (Persian); and *Iran Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, op. cit., p. 183 (Persian).

⁸⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Ahvaz, July 2022. So-called honour killings are a specific form of gender-related murder, in which people kill relatives – predominantly, women and girls – in the name of protecting family or community honour. “Gender-Related Killings of Women and Girls”,

C. Environmental Degradation

A severe environmental crisis, the legacy of decades of ecological mismanagement, compounds Khuzestan's socio-economic troubles.⁸⁷ Frequent droughts notwithstanding, the province's water use from both renewable and non-renewable sources has steadily increased, causing a state of "water bankruptcy" where usage exceeds renewable supply.⁸⁸ Even during an unusually wet period in 2019-2020, when rains caused flooding, Iranian officials failed to effectively store excess water for future droughts.⁸⁹

Though Khuzestan has five large rivers – the Karun (Iran's only navigable river), Karkheh, Dez, Maroon, Shavoor and Zohreh-Jarrahi – water shortages plague residents' lives.⁹⁰ Rationing is frequent in cities across the province.⁹¹ With urban and

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 2013; and "The United Nations in Pakistan urges government action to end 'honour killings'", press release, UN Women Asia and the Pacific, 20 June 2016. In April 2008, Khuzestan's police chief reported that more than 40 per cent of the province's murders were "honour killings", the second-highest percentage among Iranian provinces after Sistan-Baluchestan. "Khuzestan's police chief: More than 40 per cent of murders in Khuzestan are honour killings", Iranian Students' News Agency, 26 April 2008 (Persian). In February 2022, citing police data, BBC Persian estimated that 39.1 per cent of murders in Khuzestan in the period 2013-2017 were "honour"-based. Tweet by BBC Persian, @bbcpersian, 2:08pm, 6 February 2022 (Persian). A study by the head of a women's rights organisation in Ahvaz showed that at least 60 women were killed in the name of honour between 2019 and 2021. Maryam Rezakhah, "60 femicides in two years only in Khuzestan", Shahrvand Online, 8 February 2022 (Persian).

⁸⁷ "Aqueduct water risk atlas", World Resources Institute, undated; "Current climate trends and variability: Iran", Climate Change Knowledge Portal, World Bank, undated; and Kaveh Madani, "Water Management in Iran: What is Causing the Looming Crisis", *Journal of Environmental Studies and Science*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2014).

⁸⁸ Mohsen Maghrebi et al., "Iran's agriculture in the Anthropocene", *Earth's Future*, vol. 8, no. 9 (2020); Kaveh Madani, Amir Agha-Kouchak and Ali Mirchi, "Iran's Socio-economic Drought: Challenges of a Water-Bankrupt Nation", *Iranian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 6 (2016); and Amir Agha-Kouchak et al., "Anthropogenic Drought: Definition, Challenges and Opportunities", *Reviews of Geophysics*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2021). Kaveh Madani, the former deputy head of Iran's Environmental Department, defines "water bankruptcy" as follows: "Once a nation empties its water checking account [surface water] and then also its water savings account [ground water], it is left with many creditors [water rights holders] whose demands cannot be met ... Among the most visible signs of water bankruptcy throughout Iran are its shrinking lakes, wetlands and rivers, declining groundwater levels, empty reservoirs, hydroelectricity production shortages, desertification, deforestation, biodiversity loss, dust storms, sinkholes and soil subsidence". Crisis Group telephone interview, Toronto, May 2022. See also Kaveh Madani and Sanam Mahoozi, "Iran's 'water bankruptcy' is a warning for the entire Middle East", *Democracy for the Arab World Now*, 4 January 2022.

⁸⁹ For detailed information on Iran's water resources and storage facilities, see *Iran Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, Statistical Centre of Iran, p. 339 (Persian). On Khuzestan's water resources and storage facilities, see *Khuzestan Statistical Yearbook 2021-2022 (1400)*, Statistical Centre of Iran, p. 311 (Persian). For data on Iran's rainfall, see "An Assessment of the Unprecedented Extreme Precipitation Events over Iran: From Satellite Perspective", Center for Hydrometeorology and Remote Sensing, University of California-Irvine, 5 May 2019.

⁹⁰ Behzad Raeisi, a local singer turned climate activist, regularly documents Khuzestan's environmental maladies on his Instagram page. Another activist, Pouneh Pilram, a former local official in Ahvaz, asserts that water shortages adversely affect women more than men. One reason is that traditionally it is women's responsibility to collect clean water. They must travel long distances to perform the task, straining themselves physically, encountering occasional hazards and spending time that could otherwise have gone to education or economically rewarding activity. See "Women defenceless against water stress / How water crisis complicates women's lives", *Jameh* 24, 31 July 2021 (Persian). For

industrial waste dumped into the rivers, water quality is also poor.⁹² Drinking water has thus become a precious commodity. Households that can afford it have large filtration systems essential for turning piped water potable; those without such means have to purchase filtered water from shops or consume substandard water.⁹³

Water woes are hurting other public utilities. Temperatures in the summer often surpass 50°C, causing water to evaporate from irrigation canals, reservoirs and rivers, which in turn reduces the volume available for generating electricity, prompting cuts in service.⁹⁴ In the winter, rain combined with particles of dust and sand deposits an insulating layer around electrical wires, which in turn disrupts the power grid and cripples water treatment plants. In 2017, power cuts forced water purification plants offline, leaving millions of residents without electricity or water for days in a province that is the country's largest hydroelectricity producer.⁹⁵

Water shortages also affect air quality. The wetlands in Khuzestan, Shadegan and Hur al-Azim, are so depleted that they are producing dust storms. The first area has been languishing for decades, due to damaging agricultural initiatives and the environmental fallout from the destruction of Kuwaiti oil wells by Iraqi forces in 1991.⁹⁶ The second wetland, shared with Iraq and one of the largest marshes in the Middle East, provided a habitat for mammals, fish and birds until Iran dried up swathes of it to drill for oil, a step the government contends it had to take in response to U.S. sanctions, which limit its access to modern equipment for oil extraction.⁹⁷ Other parts of

more on water scarcity's impact on Khuzestani women, see Mohammadi, "The hellish days of Karun's women", op. cit. UNESCO has designated Khuzestan's Shushtar hydraulic irrigation system, which goes back to the reign of King Darius the Great of the Achaemenid dynasty in the fifth century BCE, as "a masterpiece of creative genius". It is still partly functional today. "Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System", World Heritage Conversation, UNESCO, 2009; and "How Iran's Khuzestan went from wetland to wasteland", *The Guardian*, 16 April 2015.

⁹¹ "Shortage of drinking water in Khorramshahr/Sale of fresh water also limited", Mehr News, 28 June 2018 (Persian).

⁹² Reportedly, 220,000 cubic metres of sewage is dumped into the Karun on a daily basis. "Ahvaz's environmental indices are far from standard", Islamic Republic News Agency, 15 June 2022 (Persian).

⁹³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Khuzestan residents, June-September 2022.

⁹⁴ "70 per cent of water stored in Karkheh Dam has evaporated", Tahririeh Studies Institute, 19 July 2021 (Persian).

⁹⁵ Ramin Mostaghim and Shashank Bengali, "Iran's president tries to defuse anger in an oil-rich province hit by dust storms, blackouts and protests", *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 2017. As Madani, the former deputy head of Iran's Environmental Department, put it, "Such events should have brought the interconnected nature of environment, infrastructure and urban life into focus, requiring stronger foresight and long-term thinking about solutions". Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2022. The government blamed the power cuts on surging consumer demand for electricity, particularly from "miners" of cryptocurrency like Bitcoin. According to a study, approximately 4.5 per cent of the world's Bitcoin mining occurs in Iran. "Iran suffers twin power & water crises", *The Iran Primer*, 3 August 2021; and "How Iran uses Bitcoin mining to evade sanctions and 'export' millions of barrels of oil", *Elliptic*, 21 May 2021.

⁹⁶ "The Environmental Impacts of the Gulf War 1991", International Institute for Applied Systems and Analysis, April 2004.

⁹⁷ Kaveh Madani, "Have International Sanctions Impacted Iran's Environment?", *World*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2021); and Mahshid Gazabizadeh, Gholam Reza Sabzghabaei and Soolmaz Dashti, "Analysis and Evaluation of Hur Al-Azim Wetland Conservation Strategies Using SWOT and QSPM Matrix", *Journal of Irrigation Sciences and Engineering*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2019) (Persian).

Hur al-Azim have too little water due to dams and drought, wrecking the ecosystem and the livelihoods of locals, especially buffalo herders, who once relied on the wetlands as their primary source of income.⁹⁸

Khuzestan is also exposed to dust originating from outside Iran, including Iraq and Syria, due to shrinking water bodies and abandoned farmlands in those countries.⁹⁹ The government has been unable either to address the dust problem at home or to use diplomacy to plan regional cooperation in mitigating it.¹⁰⁰ The regular dust storms often make Ahvaz and other Khuzestani cities the most polluted in the world by inhalable particulate matter.¹⁰¹

Acts of nature certainly play their part in driving environmental dilapidation. Khuzestan is prone to both floods and droughts.¹⁰² Droughts are associated with reduced water availability, smaller crop yields, drying wetlands, wildfires, deforestation and desertification. Floods can temporarily increase the volume of available water by filling up reservoirs and wetlands. But they take lives, displace farmers and destroy agricultural lands.¹⁰³

Still, mismanagement appears to be the main factor causing and exacerbating Khuzestan's environmental degradation. The province's resource abundance became a curse, tempting governments – both before and after the 1979 revolution – to over-exploit it.¹⁰⁴ Governments expanded irrigation and drainage networks, built dams and diverted water flows. The combined burden on Khuzestan's ecology was unsustainable, particularly when added to the steady increase in demand for water, fuelled by

⁹⁸ “New details of Khuzestan’s water crisis management method”, *Sharq*, 25 August 2021 (Persian); “Drought’s 660 billion tooman damage to Khuzestan’s fishing”, Iranian Students’ News Agency, 9 August 2021 (Persian); and “Thousands of buffalo died in Ahvaz”, *Kasbokar News*, 18 July 2021 (Persian).

⁹⁹ Claire Parker and Kasha Patel, “Sandstorm wave sweeps Middle East, sending thousands to hospitals”, *Washington Post*, 26 May 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Between 2016 and 2018, Iran actively sought to cooperate through UN channels in resolving the dust crisis. It discontinued such efforts after the reimposition of U.S. sanctions in 2018, which weakened its voice in environmental forums. Crisis Group correspondence, environmental scientists, Tehran, April 2022.

¹⁰¹ Heidar Maleki et al., “Temporal Profile of PM10 and Associated Health Effects in One of the Most Polluted Cities of the World (Ahvaz, Iran) between 2009 and 2014”, *Aeolian Research*, vol. 22 (2016); and Esmail Idani et al., “Prevalence of asthma and other allergic conditions in adults in Khuzestan, southwest Iran, 2018”, *BMC Public Health*, vol. 19 (2019).

¹⁰² Amir Reza Khavarian-Garmsir et al., “Climate Change and Environmental Degradation and the Drivers of Migration in the Context of Shrinking Cities: A Case Study of Khuzestan Province, Iran”, *Sustainable Cities and Society*, vol. 47 (2019); “Emergency Plan of Action – Iran Floods”, International Federation of Red Crescent Societies, 14 January 2022; Luisa Meneghetti, “Flash floods submerge 90% of Iran: Could the devastation have been avoided?”, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, May 2019; and “Emergency Appeal – Iran, MENA | Drought”, International Federation of Red Crescent Societies, 3 March 2022.

¹⁰³ Increasingly frequent floods in Iran cost hundreds of lives each year. In 2019, after heavy rains, at least 30,000 people were displaced, nearly 80 villages were flooded, more than 200 villages were partially or completely evacuated and around 170,000 hectares of agricultural land were damaged. “ECHO daily flash”, Emergency Response Coordination Centre, 9 April 2019; and “Iran is the target of destructive floods”, Islamic Republic News Agency, 14 April 2019.

¹⁰⁴ “Because of Khuzestan’s wealth in natural resources, it became the epicentre for the government’s expansionist development agenda”, said a former Iranian environmental official. Crisis Group telephone interview, Tehran, May 2022.

rapid urbanisation and population growth, as well as agriculture and industry.¹⁰⁵ As a Khuzestani environmental activist said, “If the pressure you put on any system exceeds its capacity, it will eventually collapse”.¹⁰⁶

Across Iran, the agriculture sector, which accounts for more than 90 per cent of the country's water consumption, is highly inefficient.¹⁰⁷ Over the last few decades, the area of irrigated land has expanded dramatically, due to the leadership's ideological desire for self-sufficiency in food production despite declining water availability and environmental degradation.¹⁰⁸ A senior Iranian official said, “Many arid countries produce sufficient agricultural products for their own needs and exports. Why should Iran, which has done so for centuries, be an exception?”¹⁰⁹ Yet the government has chosen crops poorly for Iran's climate, planting too many that are water-intensive.¹¹⁰ As a former senior Khuzestani official explained, highly politicised planning aimed at resolving these issues has only perpetuated them:

It is like a game of whack-a-mole: if you shut down dams or illegal wells, you restore the rivers but drive up unemployment and risk unrest. When there are protests in one province, the government diverts water to rectify the problem, stirring protests downstream. When the energy ministry bans cultivation of a particular water-intensive crop, the trade ministry pushes to remove the prohibition. So, you get short-term unsustainable plans at best; at worst, one plan neutralises the other.¹¹¹

While demand for water has continued to rise, the construction of numerous dams, inside Iran and in neighbouring countries, has diminished both the supply and quality of water. Türkiye has placed several dams upstream on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, reducing the flow of water into the Shatt Al-Arab, the 200km-long river that sepa-

¹⁰⁵ Roohollah Noori et al., “Anthropogenic Depletion of Iran's Aquifers”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 118, no. 25 (2021).

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Dezful, May 2022.

¹⁰⁷ “We need a total U-turn in agricultural policy”, said Masoumeh Ebtekar, then vice president in charge of the environment, in 2015. Quoted in Lyse Doucet, “Nuclear deal could give Iran technologies to cut pollution”, BBC, 30 November 2015. See also Atena Mirzaei et al., “The Groundwater–Energy–Food Nexus in Iran's Agricultural Sector: Implications for Water Security”, *Water*, vol. 11, no. 9 (2019), p. 1835; and Maghrebi, et al., “Iran's Agriculture in the Anthropocene”, op. cit., p. 1547.

¹⁰⁸ Peyman Saemian et al., “How Much Water Did Iran Lose over the Last Two Decades?”, *Journal of Hydrology: Regional Studies*, vol. 41 (2022); and Madani, “Water Management in Iran: What is Causing the Looming Crisis”, op. cit., p. 315.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tehran, June 2023. For a collection of Ayatollah Khamenei's statements on the need for agricultural self-sufficiency, see “Supreme Leader: Iran can produce food for a population four times larger than its own”, Tasnim News Agency, 30 May 2017 (Persian).

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, climate experts, Tehran, January–March 2023. Examples of water-intensive crops include rice, wheat and corn. Only when water becomes very scarce does the government feel the need to restrict planting of these crops – and, then, only temporarily. Its policies thus lead to spikes of unemployment and social discontent, while the long-term drain on the country's available water continues. See, for example, “Farmers protest ban on growing rice”, Fars News, 29 May 2021 (Persian).

¹¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Ahvaz, July 2022. For an example of such conflicting priorities, see Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, “Iran's thirsty energy industry runs up against water shortage”, Reuters, 29 October 2019.

rates Iran from Iraq and merges with the Karun before emptying into the Gulf.¹¹² But Iran itself has built dams at a frenzied pace for years.¹¹³

Khuzestan's infamous Gotvand dam on the Karun, completed in 2012, is emblematic of development gone wrong. Despite numerous expert warnings, the dam was constructed over salt beds, which turned it into a de facto salination plant.¹¹⁴ This catastrophe, which has put far too much salt into the Karun's water and thus the soil downstream, has badly disrupted farming. It cannot be remedied, moreover, as neither removing the dam nor desalinating the water appears feasible.¹¹⁵ "With this one engineering mistake, we turned Khuzestan's water salty", acknowledged a senior government official.¹¹⁶ As a result, thousands of date palm trees, on which the livelihood of many Khuzestanis depends, have shrivelled up.¹¹⁷

Corruption is partly responsible for such disastrous decisions. Khatam al-Anbiya, an engineering firm belonging to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, is the main beneficiary of mega-projects like dams.¹¹⁸ It lobbies the government to approve such ventures with little or no regard for the ecological ramifications. "The damage that Khatam al-Anbiya and its associates have inflicted on Khuzestan's landscape and water resilience is bound to render this province uninhabitable in the near future", said an environmental activist.¹¹⁹ Equally damaging is the Revolutionary Guards' hostility toward environmental activism as a pursuit supposedly susceptible to infiltration by Iran's foes. The government has silenced high-profile environmental experts, many of whom they have forced into exile or imprisoned on spurious espionage charges, heightening

¹¹² "Is a water crisis brewing between Turkey and Iran?", *Al-Monitor*, 13 May 2022.

¹¹³ Iran has contracted to construct at least 600 dams in the last three decades. Charlotte Bruneau and Ahmed Rasheed, "As its rivers shrink, Iraq thirsts for regional cooperation", Reuters, 7 September 2021. "We made these mistakes in the 1980s", Issa Kalantari, the former head of Iran's Environment Department and a former agriculture minister, admitted in 2018. "Then we came to realise that in places that we'd built dams, we shouldn't have built any, and in places where we should have built dams, we didn't build any". Quoted in "Iran risks losing 70% of farmlands: Environment chief", Agence France Presse, 5 October 2018. See also Mohammad Heydari, Faridah Othman and Mohammad Noori, "A Review of the Environmental Impact of Large Dams in Iran", *International Journal of Civil and Structural Engineering*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2013), p. 4.

¹¹⁴ "Gotvand Dam: What is said in the media and what has remained unsaid", BBC Persian, 13 August 2020; "Gotvand Dam: A disaster that raises salinity of Karun's water by 30 per cent every year", *Ghanoon*, 8 July 2018 (Persian); and "Gotvand Dam: A construction plan whose execution is wrong and demolition is even more wrong", Young Journalists Club, 31 July 2021 (Persian).

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Iranian environmental experts, June 2022.

¹¹⁶ Issa Kalantari, quoted in Arezoo Mirzakhani, "Gotvand Dam: An environmental disaster", Iranwire, 16 July 2018.

¹¹⁷ Some 12,000 hectares of date palm trees in Abadan and 14,000 in Shadegan are reportedly near desiccation because of water scarcity and salination. "Thirsty palm trees in Maroon's downstream", *Iran Newspaper*, 10 August 2021 (Persian).

¹¹⁸ Nik Kowsar, "The IRGC and Iran's 'water mafia'", Middle East Institute, 5 February 2021; and "Big Guards-owned company may lose out as Iran economy, politics shift", Reuters, 26 May 2016.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Ahvaz, May 2022. A former senior Iranian official noted that while the Revolutionary Guards might see the projects as a way to embezzle public funds, the political elite often has a vested interest of its own. "Nothing yells delivering progress more than photo ops while inaugurating mega-projects like dams", he noted. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2022.

the dangers associated with activism in this field.¹²⁰ As an environmental expert put it, “What the [Guards] see as cooperating with the enemy is nothing but scientific and technical cooperation with the outside world, which Iran now needs more than ever. But the main reason they mistrust us is that they believe we endanger their vested economic interests”.¹²¹

Iran’s leadership often makes climate change and sanctions the scapegoats for its own governance failures.¹²² While neither is the root cause, both do contribute to Khuzestan’s troubles.¹²³ Data from the past century show that since the 1990s the Middle East has warmed at double the global average, leading to more frequent and severe heat waves, floods, dust storms and droughts.¹²⁴ Along with an expected drop in precipitation, the effects of climate change are projected to reduce the snowpack in mountains, leaving less to melt into Khuzestan’s rivers.¹²⁵ Sanctions compound these predicaments, primarily by limiting Iran’s access to state-of-the-art technology, know-how and money, especially international aid and climate adaptation financing (eg, from the World Bank or the Global Environment Facility).¹²⁶ More importantly, sanctions have pushed environmental issues down Iran’s public policy agenda. Under sanctions, the leadership has adopted survivalist policies that are highly damaging to the environment, but which it sees as politically justified.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ Thomas Erdbrink, “He fought for Iran’s environment and was arrested. Now, he’s dead”, *The New York Times*, 10 February 2018; and “Pressed by hard-liners, U.S.-trained environmentalist quits post in Iran”, *The New York Times*, 18 April 2018.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2022.

¹²² Despite being the world’s sixth-largest carbon dioxide emitter, Iran is one of the few countries that has not ratified the 2015 Paris climate pact, conditioning its signature on the removal of U.S. sanctions. Matt McGrath, “Climate change: Iran says lift sanctions and we’ll ratify Paris agreement”, BBC, 21 November 2021.

¹²³ “Climate Action Tracker: Iran”, Climate Action Tracker; and “Extreme hotspot: What 60°C means for the Middle East”, Al Jazeera, 8 November 2021.

¹²⁴ “Feeling the Heat: Adapting to Climate Change in the Middle East and Central Asia”, International Monetary Fund, 30 March 2022.

¹²⁵ Saeed Jamali, Ahmad Abrishamchi and Kaveh Madani, “Climate Change and Hydropower Planning in the Middle East: Implications for Iran’s Karkheh Hydropower Systems”, *Journal of Energy Engineering*, vol. 139, no. 3 (2013).

¹²⁶ Kaveh Madani, “The Unintended Environmental Implications of Iran Sanctions”, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 2021.

¹²⁷ One example is Iran’s use of low-quality gasoline, prompted by U.S. sanctions on imports of refinery equipment needed for producing less-polluting fuel. Verity Ratcliffe, “U.S. sanctions are forcing Iran to ditch push to cleaner fuels”, Bloomberg, 20 August 2019.

IV. Separatism and Religious Defiance

Like other peripheral regions of Iran home to large ethnic minorities, notably the heavily Kurdish areas in the west and the Baluch lands along the south-eastern frontiers with Afghanistan and Pakistan, Khuzestan has militant groups agitating for greater autonomy and even independence.¹²⁸ These organisations, some of which operate from abroad, have at times resorted to violence, and the central government frequently spies a foreign hand behind their activities. To be clear, government neglect and mismanagement, not external meddling, are the primary causes of economic, social and political discontent in Khuzestan. Still, while separatist sentiments are born of local circumstance, foreign governments appear on occasion to have encouraged them. Such support stems from longstanding regional practices, which Iran has engaged in at least as much as anyone else, of keeping foes preoccupied with internal dissent.

Separatist violence in Khuzestan is irregular, but occasionally deadly. In June 2005, four bombs went off at government and private buildings, including the provincial governor's residence; the attacks went unclaimed, but the Supreme National Security Council pinned them on externally backed and foreign-based groups.¹²⁹ Four months later, when a bombing at an Ahvaz market killed six and injured 100, President Ahmadinejad's government alleged it had been orchestrated by the UK, without presenting any credible evidence.¹³⁰ Subsequent years saw attacks on military personnel and energy infrastructure.¹³¹

Most significantly, in September 2018, the armed wing of the separatist Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA) claimed it had carried out an attack on a military parade in Ahvaz that killed 25 and injured scores. The Islamic State, or

¹²⁸ An expert on Arabism in Khuzestan estimated that a half-dozen such organisations operate outside Iran, most of which seek independence and the rest of which call for federalism. Crisis Group telephone interview, 15 June 2022. The area was largely autonomous when Reza Shah, founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, mounted a military campaign in the 1920s that imposed Tehran's control and subdued Sheikh Khaz'al, the local chieftain. Svat Soucek, "Arabistan or Khuzistan", *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2/3 (1984); and Shahbaz Shahnavaz, "Kaz'al Khan", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 16. In the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution, demands for autonomy in Khuzestan triggered unrest, which the regime violently suppressed. William Branigin, "Iran Arabs, Khomeini forces clash violently", *Washington Post*, 31 May 1979; and Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, 2009), ch. 8.

¹²⁹ Nazila Fathi, "At least 10 are killed by bombs in Iran", *The New York Times*, 12 June 2005; and Bill Samii, "Iran: Bombings may be connected with minorities, elections", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 June 2005.

¹³⁰ Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran/U.K.: Bombing accusations highlight 'differences and disagreements'", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 17 October 2005; and "Iran: Amnesty International Condemns Executions after Unfair Trials", Amnesty International, 15 February 2007.

¹³¹ See, for example, "Iran arrests group linked to 'Zionists'", Al Jazeera, 12 November 2012; "Iran's Arab minority drawn into Middle East unrest", Reuters, 15 August 2013; "IRGC dismantles terrorist cell in south", Fars News Agency, 7 April 2014 (Persian); "Ahwazi Arab pipeline explosion indicates renewed attacks against energy pipelines in southern Iran but capability limited", *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report*, 14 September 2015; and "Iran: Pipeline fire not sabotage act", *Tehran Times*, 4 January 2017.

ISIS, issued a competing claim of responsibility.¹³² Iran responded as if both claims were accurate. First, it launched ballistic missiles at what it said was an ISIS base in Syria.¹³³ Then, in November 2020, Iran's intelligence ministry announced the arrest of ASMLA figure Habib Chaab, accusing him of plotting the Ahvaz attack as well as a series of others on pipelines and government facilities in Khuzestan.¹³⁴

In keeping with tactics used against other separatist movements, Tehran has in recent years reportedly killed or kidnapped several prominent figures associated with Arab secessionism and living abroad, especially in Europe. In November 2017, ASMLA's founder, Mola Nissi, was shot and killed in The Hague; Dutch intelligence found "strong indications" of Iranian government involvement, which Tehran denied.¹³⁵ The following year, Danish authorities revealed what in their judgment was an Iranian plan to kill ASMLA's Denmark-based leader.¹³⁶ Such attacks and alleged plots led the European Union to sanction an Iranian intelligence ministry directorate and two government officials in January 2019.¹³⁷ Later that year, Swedish authorities convicted an Iraqi-Swedish dual national for what prosecutors asserted had been a four-year effort tracking Iranian Arab refugees in at least four European countries; a Stockholm court ruled that it was a "systematic" intelligence operation linked to the Iranian government.¹³⁸

Dutch intelligence claims to have found evidence of Saudi support for ASMLA, as well as evidence of failed Saudi attempts in 2018 to encourage cooperation between it and Mujahedin-e Khalq, an Iranian dissident group based in Albania that the U.S.

¹³² "Arab separatist group claims Iran attack", Associated Press, 22 September 2018; "Islamic State says Iran attack will not be the last: al Furqan", Reuters, 26 September 2018; and "Security Council press statement on terrorist attack in Ahvaz, Iran", press release, UN, 24 September 2018. Iran's then-foreign minister blamed "terrorists recruited, trained, armed and paid by a foreign regime" for the attack. Tweet by Javad Zarif, @JZarif, 4:08am, 22 September 2018. Nicholas Heras, "Iran's high-value target in Europe – Habib Jaber al-Ka'abi", Jamestown Foundation, May 2019.

¹³³ Hwaida Saad and Rod Nordland, "Iran fires a ballistic missile at ISIS in Syria, avenging an earlier attack", *The New York Times*, 1 October 2018.

¹³⁴ "Iran intelligence ministry nabs ringleader of Saudi, Israeli-sponsored terror group", Tasnim News Agency, 12 November 2020. Chaab, who had been involved in ASMLA activities from Sweden, was, according to Turkish authorities, induced to travel to Istanbul, where he was abducted and taken to Iran in an "illegal operation by Iranian intelligence". The Turkish government detained nearly a dozen individuals suspected of involvement. Alex Crawford, "Habib Chaab: Files show how Iranian dissident was kidnapped in Turkey after 'honeytrap by Iran'", Sky News, 17 December 2020; and Kareem Fahim and Erin Cunningham, "Turkey says Iranian intelligence was behind elaborate plot to kidnap opponent in Istanbul", *Washington Post*, 13 December 2020. Iran executed Chaab three years later. "Iran hangs Swedish-Iranian convicted over attack that killed 25 people", Reuters, 6 May 2023.

¹³⁵ "Iranian political activist shot dead in Netherlands", Reuters, 9 November 2017; and "Iran likely involved in assassinations in the Netherlands", Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service, 8 January 2019.

¹³⁶ "PET investigates Iranian planning of assassination on Danish soil", Danish Security and Intelligence Service, 30 October 2018. Iran's foreign ministry labelled the Danish disclosures "a continuation of enemies' plots to damage Iranian relations with Europe". Quoted in Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Denmark pushes for fresh Iran sanctions over 'assassination plot'", *The Guardian*, 30 October 2018.

¹³⁷ Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen, Robin Emmott and Anthony Deutsch, "In shift, EU sanctions Iran over planned Europe attacks", Reuters, 8 January 2019.

¹³⁸ David Keyton, "Sweden sentences Iraqi man of spying for Iran", Associated Press, 20 December 2019; and "Sweden jails man for spying on Ahwazi community for Iran", Reuters, 20 December 2019.

and EU labelled a terrorist organisation until the early 2010s.¹³⁹ In 2020, Danish intelligence asserted that an investigation into a trio of ASMLA members had shown them to have “carried out espionage activities on behalf of a Saudi intelligence service” over a six-year period.¹⁴⁰ A Danish court found the three men guilty and, in March 2022, handed down sentences ranging from six to eight years.¹⁴¹ The March 2023 China-brokered deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations could erode Saudi backing for such groups.¹⁴²

External interference aside, ethnic grievance in Khuzestan has led to a rise of forms of Salafism.¹⁴³ The majority of Khuzestan’s Arabs are Shiite, but in recent years, thousands, mostly from lower-income urban and rural areas, have converted to Sunni Islam, particularly its Salafi version.¹⁴⁴ In impoverished slums, converts walk the streets dressed the Salafi way, proud of their new religious identity, which they have adopted largely as a sign of defiance of the ruling elites, who are Shiites hewing to the notion of *vilayet-e faqih*, rule by a senior cleric in the mould of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.¹⁴⁵ The regime links the rise of Salafism to “religious extremism”, blaming “Wahhabi sects” in Saudi Arabia for efforts to promote “deviant beliefs”.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Dutch official, Brussels, 14 June 2022.

¹⁴⁰ “Leading ASMLA members arrested in Denmark for espionage on behalf of Saudi Arabia”, Danish Security and Intelligence Service, 3 February 2020.

¹⁴¹ “Denmark: Three Iranian separatists sentenced for spying for Saudi Arabia”, Euro News, 2 March 2022; and “IRGC warns Saudi Arabia it must ‘control’ media ‘provoking our youth’”, Amwaj, 18 October 2022.

¹⁴² In a joint statement, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia underlined their “affirmation of the respect for the sovereignty of states and the non-interference in internal affairs of states”. See “Joint Trilateral Statement by the People’s Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran”, Chinese Foreign Ministry, 10 March 2023.

¹⁴³ The term “Salafis” refers to Sunni Muslims who embrace a puritanical interpretation of Islamic scripture based on the example set by *al-salaf al-saleh* (the venerable ancestors), a reference mainly to the Prophet Muhammad and his first four “rightly guided” successors as leader of the Muslim community. For a discussion of contemporary Salafism, see Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

¹⁴⁴ A 2020 survey showed that 92 per cent of converts to Salafism in Khuzestan were ethnic Arabs. Extensive interviews with 25 converts showed that “issues such as unemployment, poverty and lack of access to welfare services lay the ground for some young people to embrace Wahhabism”. Alireza Dawodi, “Pathology of Religious Conversion in Khuzestan Province”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020) (Persian); and Aghil Daghagheleh, “The Myth of Jihadism: The Rise of Salafi Islam in Iran”, in Elisa Orofino, eds., *Rethinking Islamism Beyond Jihadi Violence* (Wilmington, 2023).

¹⁴⁵ Salafis in Khuzestan are often easily identifiable by their outfit. Men often wear beards of a specified length, while shaving their moustaches, along with garments that reach just above the heel. Women often wear tunics that cover the entire body, or even a *burqa* that also covers the face. Crisis Group interviews, journalists and experts, Khuzestan, February–November 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Wahhabism is a strict orthodox form of Sunni Islam based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth-century preacher from the Najd plateau in what is now Saudi Arabia. It is the version of Islam promoted by the Sunni clerical establishment that backs the contemporary Saudi state. Many of those clerics express hostility toward Shiism; the Shiite clergy in Iran respond in part by using “Wahhabi” as an epithet for Sunnis they accuse of being sectarian. “Wahhabis promote deviant beliefs in Iran”, Mehr News, 27 October 2010 (Persian); “Fighting Wahhabism is Khuzestan’s priority”, International Quran News Agency, 9 April 2019 (Persian); and “Intelligence minister’s account of religious change in parts of the country”, Shafaqna, 2 May 2019 (Persian).

In a sense, the rise of Salafism in Khuzestan is part of a national trend. More than four decades of (Shiite) theocratic rule have alienated many Iranians, especially among the middle class, from religion altogether, with some turning to secularism, agnosticism or atheism.¹⁴⁷ Iranian women's growing pushback against the mandatory hijab, which accelerated in September 2022, is partly a manifestation of this phenomenon.¹⁴⁸ But among poverty-stricken Arabs who feel discriminated against and follow Arabic-language satellite television channels promoting Salafism, the religious disaffection is increasingly taking a different form.¹⁴⁹ As an Iranian sociologist put it, "There is evidence that ethnic grievance is driving the rise of Salafism in Khuzestan, and conversion to Salafism acts as a form of dissent from oppressive ethnic policies".¹⁵⁰

The rise of Salafism in Khuzestan is thus another example of the country's fault lines deepening in its neglected peripheries. While separatist feelings appear more subdued than in the past, activism by Iran's minorities, and other under-represented groups, has increased amid the political mobilisation against the government across the country.¹⁵¹ Members of various ethnic groups, including Turks, Turkomans, Kurds and Baluchis, hailed the 2021 uprising in Khuzestan as part of the historical struggle of "non-Persian minorities".¹⁵² Just days after the uprising, hundreds of people demonstrated in the streets of Tabriz, the capital of Azerbaijan province.¹⁵³ Still, even without overtly ethnic or religious motives, the widespread sense of discrimination, compounded by environmental problems and economic hardship, will breed further resentment and could push Khuzestani youths toward anti-regime protest and violence.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ Hamed Abdullahi Sefidan et al., "A Meta-analysis of the Trend of Religiosity in Iran in the Past Decade", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 24, no. 92 (2020) (Persian); Taghi Azardarmaki, Houshang Naebi and Mehri Bahar, "The Youth Generation and Religiosity in Iran", *New Horizons*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2010); and Aghil Daghagheleh, "A 'Blue' Generation and Protests in Iran", *Middle East Report*, 22 January 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Vivian Yee and Leily Nikounazar, "Businesses caught in crossfire as Iran enforces hijab law", *The New York Times*, 5 May 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Alireza Dawodi, Vahid Aqhili and Mohammadreza Rasouli, "Investigating the Role of Ideological Programs of Vesal Satellite Network in Religious Conversion among the Citizens of Khuzestan", *The Socio-Cultural Research Journal of Rahbord*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2021) (Persian).

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Aghil Daghagheleh, October 2022.

¹⁵¹ Fatemeh Aman, "Protests have brought Iran's ethnic minorities and Persian majority closer", Stimson Centre, 27 February 2023.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, political analysts, Tehran, February-December 2022. See also "Protest movement in Ahwaz: 'Fire under the ashes'", *Al-Majalla*, 13 August 2021.

¹⁵³ "Demonstration in Tabriz in solidarity with Khuzestan", BBC Persian, 24 July 2021.

¹⁵⁴ In 2016, the province had 766,000 residents below the age of 25, of whom 41 per cent were not employed, educated or in training. Mohammad Fazeli and Eisa Mansouri, "The Peacock's Plumage is Its Enemy", *Ayandehnegar*, vol. 111 (September 2021) (Persian); and Hamid Reza Jalaiepour, "How to address the national-ethnic challenges in Iran", *Engar*, 23 November 2022 (Persian).

V. A Bleak Prognosis

Khuzestan's intersecting challenges defy quick or easy solutions. Were the government to appreciate their scale, and be willing to constructively address them, it could take steps that would do some good. For example, administrative and socio-economic reforms signalling seriousness of intent to elevate periphery concerns would go some way toward ameliorating Khuzestan's perception that they are little but a nuisance in Tehran's eyes. Improved foreign relations, especially with adjoining states, would ease technical cooperation on the environmental front. Yet the standoff with the West is likely to complicate such efforts, especially with respect to economic engagement and provision of international investment and expertise, and to remain of only partial benefit so long as the state fails to reconsider its fundamental approach to governance.

Successive Iranian governments have addressed Khuzestan's deep problems in a primarily reactive fashion. In the wake of an extreme event, such as a drought, the government compensates farmers to placate them and pre-empt protests.¹⁵⁵ The appointment of a "special governor" is another example of stamping out brush fires rather than tackling the causes.¹⁵⁶ This pattern of temporary fixes means that the problems not only recur but often get worse. Sustainable solutions have three components: a strategic vision backed by durable political commitments; the funding to pay for adequate remedies; and the capacity – in terms of technology and personnel – to carry them out. All have been lacking to date.

But the past need not be prelude to further failures. Each of Khuzestan's challenges could be addressed, if not necessarily resolved, through particular reforms. It is especially important that Arabs and other minorities, as well as other marginalised groups such as women, have a role in governance. More participatory politics could increase people's buy-in for policy changes. In the same vein, anti-discrimination legislation could provide a legal basis for protecting minorities in Khuzestan and elsewhere; at present the constitution ostensibly prohibits discrimination but is silent on penalties for those who exercise it, or redress for those who experience it.¹⁵⁷

Reform of Khuzestan's resource management is essential. Unbridled extraction and water-intensive agricultural methods risk rendering swathes of the province uninhabitable, even if they help keep unemployment from spiralling out of control. Anger will mount as more and more people suffer dislocation, while little of the province's oil wealth finds its way back in through investments. Yet tackling Khuzestan's environmental crisis requires radical changes to Iran's unsustainable economic development model, in which stopgap measures addressing immediate needs undermine strategic planning that considers long-term implications, especially in terms of depleting natural resources like water.

¹⁵⁵ Kaveh Madani, "Iran's decision-makers must shoulder the blame for its water crisis", *The Guardian*, 5 August 2021.

¹⁵⁶ As Mohammad Kianush Rad, a former parliamentarian, noted, "as long as the governor does not have the support of local communities, he will comply with demands from higher authorities in Tehran to remain in office". Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2022.

¹⁵⁷ Articles 3, 48, and 101 of the Islamic Republic's constitution ban discrimination against individuals and the country's provinces. but the constitution does not specify any consequences for discrimination. "Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran", Constitutional Council, 28 July 1989.

Such planning means making smarter investments. Rather than focusing on highly pollutant energy infrastructure, the Iranian government, supported by international partners and experts, should explore renewable energy, particularly solar and wind power, carbon mitigation, capturing flared gas, greenhouse farming and water-retention landscape regeneration.¹⁵⁸ It is also crucial that future infrastructure projects include environmental impact assessments. Building early-warning and monitoring systems for droughts, floods, heat waves, wildfires and dust storms can help the government and other stakeholders better cope with extreme-weather events. Mitigating the dust problem requires collaboration with neighbouring countries in addition to serious local investment.¹⁵⁹

Were the Islamic Republic actually willing to enact such reforms, Western sanctions would be an obstacle – certainly to investment. Those sanctions preclude the possibility of Iran's Gulf Arab neighbours, who have the requisite capital and with whom Tehran has taken initial steps to repair ties, to invest in the necessary projects.¹⁶⁰ Iran needs the sanctions lifted or at least modified so that environment-related activities are exempt. It also needs more stable relations with other regional and extra-regional powers capable of helping it, whether with funds, technical expertise or coordination on environmental concerns, like damming or dust storms, that transcend borders.

For now, though, the bigger problem lies with the regime. The above-mentioned steps may seem like common sense, but none is likely, given the Islamic Republic's decades-long track record of stymied change, poor governance and endemic corruption, let alone the rupture between state and society on display in the unrest that erupted in 2022.¹⁶¹ Iran needs a political, economic, social and foreign policy about-face.

Even former senior regime officials, critical of the government but reluctant to break with the Islamic Republic altogether, increasingly contend that the system has reached a dead end.¹⁶² Society has passed a psychological threshold, they acknowledge. Iranians demand transformation and no longer believe in reform. Many call for a referendum on the country's trajectory.¹⁶³ Former President Mohammad Khatami argues that the revolution has been “diverted from its path”, beseeching the leadership to opt for

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, water and climate experts, October 2021–December 2022. For more, see “Half of Iran's potential wind energy capacity is in Khuzestan”, Mehr News, 23 December 2015 (Persian); “Solar power: Khuzestan's sustainable wealth”, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting News Agency, 8 July 2021 (Persian); Olivia Lazard and Cornelius Adebahr, “How the EU can help Iran tackle water scarcity”, Carnegie Endowment, 7 July 2022; and Mohsen Mesgaran et al., “Iran's Land Suitability for Agriculture”, *Science Reports*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2017).

¹⁵⁹ Karim Elgendy and Hamid Pouran, “From Rivalry to Partnership: Managing Climate Risks through Regional Collaboration”, Middle East Institute, 16 May 2022; “Iran, Iraq, Syria to cooperate on sandstorms”, *Al-Monitor*, 3 June 2022; and “Iran to host intl. conference on combating sand, dust storms”, Mehr News, 9 May 2023.

¹⁶⁰ Madani, “The unintended environmental implications of Iran sanctions”, op. cit.; and “Iran's failure to tackle climate change – a question of priority”, Al Jazeera, 9 November 2021.

¹⁶¹ A former official at Iran's environmental department said, “When there is no trust between the people and the government tackling the country's environmental challenges becomes that much more difficult. Often, they can't even constructively talk to one another, let alone cooperate”, Crisis Group interview, Tehran, June 2023.

¹⁶² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tehran, September 2022–March 2023.

¹⁶³ “Iranian society has reached the point of no return”, Iran's Chamber of Commerce, 26 January 2023 (Persian).

“self-correction instead of self-destruction”.¹⁶⁴ One of his successors, Hassan Rouhani, has suggested that a plebiscite on three fundamental questions (domestic politics, the economy and foreign policy) could save the country from disaster.¹⁶⁵ Former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who has been under house arrest since 2011, has called for a referendum on a new constitution.¹⁶⁶ So, too, has the country’s most prominent Sunni cleric.¹⁶⁷ Many human rights and civil society activists support this call.¹⁶⁸

But, again, the outlook is bleak for a change of course. Ayatollah Khamenei seems determined to rely on the security forces to suppress protests.¹⁶⁹ Only truly pluralistic elections can open the way to a better future, not only for Khuzestan, but for the country. But these would require curtailing the authority of the Guardian Council, which signs off on laws and evaluates candidates for elected office; granting more press and personal freedoms; and de-escalating tensions with the West.

¹⁶⁴ “Khatami: The revolution has lost its way”, *Etemad Online*, 10 May 2023 (Persian).

¹⁶⁵ “Hassan Rouhani: One referendum on three key questions should be held”, *Etemad Online*, 8 April 2023 (Persian).

¹⁶⁶ “Mir-Hossein Mousavi demands a new constitution and a constitutional forum to save Iran”, BBC Persian, 4 February 2023.

¹⁶⁷ “Spiritual leader of Iran’s Sunni Muslims calls for referendum on protesters’ demands”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 4 November 2022.

¹⁶⁸ “350 civil society actors support Mousavi’s demand for transitioning beyond the Islamic Republic”, VOA Persian, 12 February 2023 (Persian); and “Nasrin Sotoudeh: No option is left other than a referendum on a secular republic in Iran”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 May 2023 (Persian).

¹⁶⁹ “Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rules out referendums on divisive issues”, Associated Press, 19 April 2023.

VI. Conclusion

Iran's government cannot control the weather. But that is perhaps the only challenge facing Khuzestan of which it can be absolved – and, even then, with the qualification that better long-term planning would help remediate the worst impact of droughts, floods and dust storms. Successive administrations have adopted the same approach that characterised the regime's response to the nationwide protests: a perfunctory nod to the scale of the crisis, followed by recommitment to policies that only exacerbate it over time.

Khuzestan's experience proves that the crisis is not going away. Unrest may have ebbed since late 2022, letting the Islamic Republic believe that repression, once again, has removed the immediate threat to its rule. But events in Khuzestan and other peripheral regions show that drivers of discontent accumulate and intersect. They will require a more strategic vision for prosperity than the system seems to acknowledge, let alone tries to put into practice. Put another way, if the system managed to somehow defuse the social discontent it has faced in past months, it would still confront, in regions like Khuzestan, a set of structural problems, which are bound to get worse with the effects of climate change, requiring fundamental reconsideration of its model of governance.

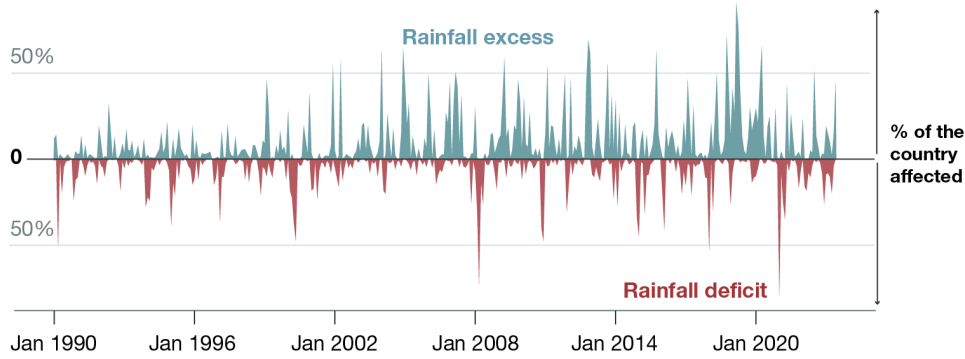
One should not be fatalistic about the prospects of improving Khuzestan's fortunes – or, for that matter, Iran's. But policymakers need to have a clear understanding of the daunting task ahead and the urgency of addressing it through both local and national measures, as well as relations with neighbouring states and Western powers. Little suggests that the government will make a good-faith investment of time, attention and money out of concern for ordinary citizens. But it is not in Tehran's interest to let the embers of discontent smoulder, either.

Ahvaz/Washington/Brussels, 21 August 2023

Appendix A: Map of Khuzestan



Appendix B: Abnormal Precipitation in Iran



Precipitation in Iran has become increasingly anomalous in recent years. Both rainfall excesses (blue) and deficits (red) affect larger areas (height) for longer periods of time (width), heightening flood and drought risks.

Source: CHIRPS precipitation data, Climate Hazards Center. Analysis by Crisis Group's Future of Conflict research, August 2023, UE / CG / CB-G / CRISIS GROUP

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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