

# Ahwazi-Arab Cultural Association of America

المركز الثقافي لعرب الأحواز في أمريكا  
كانون فرهنگی عربهای – الأحواز در أمريكا

---

## An Arab National Rebirth Searching for its Identity

By Mansur Al-Ahwazi

### Some historical highlights about Arabistan\* (Al-Ahwaz):

**\*Translator's Note:** The name "Arabistan" was given to the area by Persian officials during the Safavid Dynasty, who were alluding to the fact that the people of the area are Arabs. Later, its name was changed to "Khuzistan" by the Shah's government, after the downfall of Shaikh Khaz'al in the 1920's. However, many Arab people prefer to call the region "Al-Ahwaz", not to be mistaken with the city of Ahwaz, the center of the province.

- In 4000 B.C. the territory witnessed the birth of one of the oldest civilizations called the Eilam Semitic civilization.
- In 1436 C.E. the Arab Msha'sha'iyā state was formed under the leadership of Mohammad Ibn Fallah. It lasted for about three centuries, located between the Persian and Ottoman empires. The Msha'sha'iyā dynasty was able at certain times to control large parts of Iran including Bandar Abbas, Kermanshah and territories in Iraq including Basra and Waset, in addition to Ihsaa and Qateef.
- In 1837 the Turkish forces invaded the port city of Mohammarah and occupied it, later conquering all of Arabistan.
- In 1857 Nasser Din Shah Qajar, then king of Persia, acknowledged the independence of Mohammarah City as an emirate that has a government and law of its own.
- In 1897 Prince Maz'al Ibn Jaber El Ka'bi was assassinated and his brother prince Khaz'al ruled after him. Khaz'al allied himself with Britain to keep his emirate free from the Iranian and Turkish governments. He played a very significant role in the events of the first quarter of the century.
- In 1907 Britain and Russia made a treaty by which they divided Iran into three territories: British, Russian and neutral. The territories of Arabistan were excluded, as they were considered a semi-independent group of Arab emirates.
- In 1917 the success of the revolution in Russia led the Western countries, Britain especially, to change their strategies in the area. The West began withholding its support of Arabistan for the sake of maintaining a united Iranian bloc that would serve as a more effective barrier in the face of the Russian communists and their efforts to reach the warm waters in the (Arabian) gulf.
- In 1924 Khaz'al announced his revolution against Reza Khan. He stated his case in the League of Nations. Khaz'al asked the clergy in Najaf to issue a "fatwa" in

order to denounce Reza Khan as an atheist who was famous for his hatred of Islam and the Arabs. Yet his efforts were a failure, especially when the British did not keep their promises to him.

- In 1925 Reza Khan used deception when he failed to achieve a military victory over Prince Khaz'al. He kidnapped the Prince and imprisoned him in Tehran. Reza Khan imposed his control over Arabistan with the help of Britain, the "ally" of Arabistan. Thus the Iranian government was able to put an end to the last emirate in the area and bring Arabistan (Al-Ahwaz) under its control.
- In 1941 British forces occupied Arabistan during the Second World War.
- In 1958 the Arabistan Liberation Front was formed. Later, other armed Nasserist national groups appeared in the province.
- In 1967 the Arabistan National Liberation Front was formed, and a year later, the Ahwazi Peoples' Liberation Front.
- The Arab people, especially the petroleum workers who went on strike to hasten the downfall of the king, played a prominent role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Nonetheless, a few short months following the successful revolution, the relationship between Arabistan and the new revolutionary regime was fraught with confrontation. The confrontation occurred when the Khomeini government refused to give Arabs national and cultural rights, rights that were denied them by the former shah's government. The governor of Arabistan (Khuzistan), General Ahmed Madani, ordered the slaughter of hundreds of citizens of Mohammarah (Khorramshahr) and Abadan, who had resisted the local authorities' actions to close the Arab political and cultural centers in the province. As a result, Iran witnessed random death sentences. The Arab spiritual leader, Ayat Allah Al Shabir El Khaghani, was deported to Qum where he died mysteriously.
- In 1985 an uprising broke out in Arabistan in protest of an article in one of the Iranian newspapers that had offensive material against the Ahwazi Arabs.
- In 1994, a bloody confrontation took place between Iranian security forces and the Ahwazi Arabs whose lands had been confiscated in the "Sugar Cane" project in the province (Khuzistan). Many peasant landowners were killed.
- In an unprecedented step in the history of modern Iran in 1997, the elected president, Khatami, assigned an Arab minister, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, who is considered an exceptional case in the Islamic Republic, as he is the only Arab who was ever appointed to a high government position.
- In 2000, violent confrontation occurred between Iranian security forces and Arabs who protested against the forgery of the parliamentary election results. Likewise, bloody confrontation took place between the security forces and the citizens of Abadan City, who demonstrated against the polluted running water. Many people were killed and injured.

## Arabistan: The hidden issue in the Middle East equation

The latest political developments in the Middle East, especially the Arab summit held in Amman, have reaffirmed that existing problems between the Arabs and Iran are still a major concern for Arab leaders and peoples, particularly in light of the continuing conflict between Iran and the Emirates over the three islands in the (Arab) Gulf. It has turned out to be a growing rift in the last few years, not only in the relationship between Iran and the Gulf countries, but also in broader relations between Iranian and Arab countries. Moreover, there is an increasing Arab fear of the Iranian armament danger in the area. The prevailing atmosphere of contention in Iranian-Arab relations represents a factor in the formation of urgent questions regarding issues underlying the “absence of the Arabistan issue from Arab and international discourse”.

The political, security and social conditions in the province (Khuzistan) were, and still are, unsettled for many reasons. The most important one is the conflict between Iraq and Iran, which reached its climax in the eight-year war. The other reason is the continued resistance of the Arabistanis, who are considered the largest Arab population in the Gulf area (estimated at more than four million) after the Iraqi and Saudi peoples, against Iranian policies aimed at obliterating its own Arab national and cultural identities.

It is worth mentioning that these Iranian policies have not only targeted the Arabs, but also other non-Persians in the country such as the Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis and Turkomans, although to various degrees. These policies were principally the same and were applied both during the Shah’s reign and during the “Revolution” (Mullah’s Rule).

The policies of the former were based on a strict agenda of making everything Persian: "Persianization". The policy depended heavily upon pre-Islamic Persian heritage as its main criterion and source of inspiration, while also drawing upon western secularism and Persian chauvinism, with the aim of alienating the non-Persian ethnic groups and cultures. The result of these hegemonic policies was the economic, social and cultural retardation of the non-Persians who make up 60% of Iran's total population, leading to pervasive national crises among Iran's ethnic groups. This bred resentment and severe feelings of oppression and vulnerability among the country's minority populations. The policies also played an important role in bringing about the revolution against the Shah and his discriminatory policies and anti-Islamic projects.

The new revolutionary system would continue the policy of "Persianization", however this time in the guise of Islamic brotherhood and national unity. This turned out to be a real failure; it made the situation more explosive by exacerbating existing ethnic and religious crises and contributing to already dire social, economic and political conditions.

The power struggle in the country has evolved from a conflict centered upon differing political tendencies and groupings, to a conflict between differing administrative and state systems. This conflict has also brought with it the deterioration of state prestige regarding security in the country.

In fact, the leadership of the Iranian Revolution made the same mistake committed by the Ottoman (Turkish) government. They assumed that it was possible to make the people under their rule Turkish, utilizing a false cover of religious and Islamic

brotherhood. They failed, their hopes vanished, and their ambitious religious and political projects disappeared. The government lost its authority and prestige due to the foreign intervention and national liberation movements for independence.

Hence, due to the great similarities between the present Iranian situation and the events that took place before the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate center in Ankara, many political and academic circles in Iran are afraid that Iran will suffer a fate similar to that of the fallen Turkish empire, especially under the continually weakening unity fostered by the challenged religious authority.

Returning to the “absence of Arabistan from the core of Arab and international discourse”, we find that there are many reasons for its absence from the agenda, some of which are very significant.

Internationally, the conditions were against the Arabistan Question, from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the end of the cold war. During this period, Iran received many advantages and privileges from western countries that viewed it as a strategically important area. The western support reached its climax in the era of the king (Mohammed Reza Shah). Iran was considered a very important barrier against the communist advance towards the warm waters of the (Arab) Gulf and the Middle East. This gave Iran the chance to practice all kinds of oppression against the Iranian peoples, especially the Arabs, without an international response.

As all this was unfolding, the rest of the Arab world was busy struggling for their independence from western colonial powers. The Palestinian issue had just emerged as a central problem in the Arab and Muslim consciousness; this was in addition to internal

problems and conflicts in the Arab territories, which were, and remain, numerous. Moreover, more moderate Arab countries were tied to Iran as parts of blocs and unions that appeared during the cold war. This led these countries to keep silent (particularly in the mass media) about the Shah's aggressive policy against the people of Arabistan.

The Arabistan issue became a forbidden subject. However, there were, and still are, some "radical" Arab governments that dealt with the issue according to their own opportunistic interests. Whenever they faced a significant disagreement with the regime in Tehran, their interests in Arabistan resurfaced. This was apparent in the political arena and in the Arab mass media, which tried to deal with Arabistan as an "Arab" problem. However, whenever the agreements on Arabistan lose their significance for these regimes, they ignore the issue again, claiming that they are trying to deal with the problem according to their own strategic and national Arab priorities.

The Arabistani (Al-Ahwazi) political and cultural intellectuals failed to raise the level of significance of the Arabistan issue among the Iranian populace or to convince the western and Arab countries to change their approaches to this problem. Since the appearance of modern Iran in 1925, the question of Arabistan was one of the most important priorities on the internal and foreign governmental levels, whether in the era of the Pahlavi Dynasty or the Islamic Republic. It has influenced foreign and domestic political decisions in Tehran as one of the most important factors in the country because of its deep direct effect on the national security and economy of Iran.

Arabistan is recognized for its unique economic and strategic importance. It links the Persian territories with the Arab countries and is located on the (Arab) Gulf and "Shat

El-Arab” (waterway). Arabistan has a huge petroleum wealth, which constitutes the main source of income for the Iranian economy or about 90% of the total Iranian income from oil.

The importance of Arabistan in domestic and foreign transactions is very clear to the authorities in Iran. It plays an important role in Iranian policies and attitudes towards the Arab World, especially the border countries. This role can be seen in some of the prominent developments and events that took place in Arab-Iranian relations during the Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic eras. The most important developments were:

1. The Shah’s government formed a strategic alliance with Israel in order to protect the interests and aims that they both shared, such as combating “the danger of Arab nationalism”, which focused on getting back all the Arab lands in Palestine and Arabistan.
2. The disturbances in Iran-Iraq relations after the Iraqi “revolution” in 1958, some of which are related to Arabistan.
3. The Shah increased the confrontations against the Arab revolutionary national movements in the region under the leadership of the late Gamal Abdel-Nasser, especially after the spread of Nasserism in Arabistan to the extent that its popularity alarmed the Iranian authorities. Some armed Nasserite groups (in Arabistan) emerged and demanded complete independence from Iran. The movement’s leaders and some of its members were arrested in 1963 with the

- help of the Israeli Mossad in one of the biggest joint Iranian-Israeli intelligence operations.
4. Iran cut all diplomatic relations with Damascus in 1965 because of the speech given by then Syrian Prime Minister Yousif Z'ain in the Syrian parliament. He called for a program of action to liberate Arabistan from the Iranian occupation.
  5. The emergence of differences between Iran (after the 1979 revolution) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). On his first visit to Iran, President Yasser Arafat insisted on visiting the city of Ahwaz and on opening an office for the organization there. This aroused suspicion among Iranian officials and had negative effects on Palestinian-Iranian relations.
  6. The Iran-Iraq War: In one way or another, the Arabistan question influenced this war, if not for the important reason that it was the main arena for the battles that took place.
  7. The Iranian insistence on opposing the Middle East peace process. This insistence is partially due to the Iranian fear that the success of the peace process between the Arabs and Israel might lead to the replacement of Israel with another enemy for the Arabs in the area. These worries are exacerbated by Iranian fears that a Palestinian-Israeli resolution would then bring the issue of Arabistani independence to the forefront. Apart from mainland issues, the three Arab islands (belonging to the United Arab Emirates) occupied (in 1971) by Iran are also an external cause of anxiety. This is in addition to the



historical, national and inter-civilization conflicts between the Arabs and Persians of Iran, which increased markedly following the growth of Persian national fanaticism that took place. This in turn caused the strength of the religious alliance to wane, especially after the election of President Khatami.

In short, the Iranian conflict with the Arabs is not only about the three islands in the Gulf, but also concerns Tehran's contradictory domestic and foreign policies. On the one hand, the Iranian government tries to play the role of backer of the Arabs in the region, and at times the main supporter of the Palestinians. On the other hand, it also pursues a very chauvinistic and undemocratic domestic policy towards the Arabs in Arabistan. In recent years the central government in Iran has confiscated Arab lands in Arabistan under the pretext of the failed "Sugar Cane" plantation, while settling other non-Arabs, in particular Persians, in the area.

According to former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is considered the primary backer of the "Sugar Cane" project, it is the biggest national agricultural project in the modern history of Iran. The project is considered illegitimate by Arabistanis, who see the purpose of the project to be the unjustifiable confiscation of their lands in order to replace them by non-Arab settlers so as to get rid of the Arab population in the province. In this regard it is not different in its nature or aim from any other (forced) re-settlement projects that have occurred historically.

The Arabs affected by the resettlement project refused to give up their land and resisted the plan. This in turn led to bloody confrontation between the Arabs and local authorities from 1994 to 1995. The result was the murder of many landowners and forced

seizure of their lands. This raised anger among the Arabs in Al-Ahwaz and even among some government officials. One such official, Mr. Hashemi Zadeh, a former representative of Ahwaz City in the last Islamic parliament, angrily protested the confiscation of Arab lands, refusal of the government to pay a fair compensation for the lands, and the use of violence against the protesters, along with some of his colleagues. This last settlement project was not the first one in Arabistan, as the former Shah's government set up a Persian settlement near the Arab town of Al-Howaizeh with the help of the same Israeli consultants and experts. That settlement was called "Yazd No" (New Yazd), because most of the people were brought from the Persian city of Yazd in the center of Iran (the birthplace of president Khatami). However, the rightful Arab owners of the land removed the aforementioned settlement, following the revolution in 1979.

What must be considered with regard to the settlement projects, is that they each occurred after a big Arab defeat:

The "Yazd No" settlement was built after the 1967 defeat of the Arabs by Israel. The "Sugar Cane" project began widening after the Iraqi defeat in the second Gulf war, which resulted in the decrease of Iraqi power in the region. This sequence of events shows the strong connection between what happens in Arabistan and the rest of the Arab world.

In any event, the expansion of the "Sugar Cane" project, in addition to many other factors, has led to a worsening of the situation between Arabistan and the Islamic Republic. These factors include the Iranian government's insistence on refusing a fair payment for confiscated Arab lands, the slow pace of reconstruction in the areas destroyed

by the Iran-Iraq war, the refusal of the Iranian government to care for the environment and solve the problem of polluted running water resulting from the “Sugar Cane” project, the increase in drug addiction and the unemployment crisis, and finally, administrative corruption and the use of non-Arab staff for the most important government positions in the province (Al-Ahwaz).

More recent developments, including the great improvement of Arabistanis in the field of higher education, coupled with social, cultural and political developments that took place in Iran in general, helped in bringing about dramatic changes in the province (Al-Ahwaz). Of significance is the strengthening national awareness among the Arab public, a decrease in social and cultural backwardness, and a narrowing of the gap that separated the political and cultural elite from the common people.

Rather than focusing on their worsening living conditions, the Arabistanis are now more concerned about their cultural and political issues. As a result of the raised level of interaction and mutual effects between the élites and the public that have come about as a result of political maturity and cultural and intellectual activities, their spirit of citizenship has been strengthened and tribal ties and relations weakened; all this gave birth to a political and cultural boom in Al-Ahwaz with a broad base among the public.

In the last few years the Arabs have gone from merely distinguishing themselves from the dominant Persian nationality to pushing towards change in the political, social, and economic status quo in the Al-Ahwaz province.

The prospects of these promising changes are not clear for many reasons. The most important reason being that this upsurge in general has no clear political strategy

nor any defined dimensions or aims. This is directly linked to the lack of cohesiveness among the varying visions of those involved in these ever growing movements. Some of these tendencies call for change through the reform movement under the leadership of Khatami and within the Islamic Republic Constitution. These people still think it is possible to reach an agreement with the present government that would put an end to the cultural and national oppression against the Arabs and prevent the situation from worsening to an alarming level. At the same time, they are afraid of the Persian national attitude of the reformist movement. Those who envision a different path to change totally refuse to limit their demands and hopes within the confines of the competing parties and sections of the regime and also refuse to reduce their demands for more authority and self-rule or self- determination for the Arab people of Al-Ahwaz (Arabistan).

Therefore, the success of any tendency depends on the success of the reform movement in Tehran, especially in its designs to establish a “civil society”. Hence, we can say that the way in which the national upsurge plays out theoretically and practically in Arabistan will be decided upon by political interactions in the Iranian arena; of particular significance will be how the power struggle in Tehran plays out. The leaders of the reform movement in Iran have come to the conclusion that in order to prevent an upsurge of unrest among non-Persians, particularly an unsettling ethnic nationalist movement, they will have to first acknowledge that Iran exists as a multi-ethnic and multi-social society and that this plurality is a cause of problems for the country. It seems that the reformists have realized that Iran is no longer able to ignore the problem of

ethnic oppression, and also, can no longer solve it through outmoded approaches to the problem.

Lately, the ethnic minorities have been allowed some insignificant freedoms in discussing publicly ethnic and national minority issues in the reformist press. In addition, they have been relieved of some language restrictions that are imposed on the use of non-Persian languages in Iran in the sense that they have been allowed weekly and monthly publications in their native languages. As a result, the number of Azari (Turkish) newspapers that are demanding their national rights in Iran during the era of Khatami has jumped to more than twenty, and the Kurdish newspapers to more than ten. For the first time in the history of Iran, the Arabs were allowed to publish newspapers in their mother tongue; these newspapers express their economic, cultural and social suffering.

The reformists' policies and attitudes are not appreciated by their conservative enemies, who control the most important decision making centers, including the judicial, intelligence and security systems. The conservatives think that the reform policies are a real danger for the regime and the revolution, some even fearing for the country's future. As a result, these conservatives have tried every means to block the reforms and prevent their success.

For the first time, non-Persian territories like Al-Ahwaz have become arenas for conflict among the ruling factions who now battle for power in these regions. This is an additional factor in complicating the situation.

While the reformers try to grant some national and cultural rights to the non-Persian peoples, even if in a narrow scope to help rid the country of the potential threat to

its national security and territorial integrity, the conservatives try to increase the judicial and security procedures imposed on rights pertaining to ethnic minorities. They refuse the stopping of any of the oppressive policies practiced against these peoples during the last decade. The military and security authorities in Arabistan are under the auspices of the conservatives, which increases the degree of control this faction has over the region, in particular by stifling the activities of politically moderate Arabs. They have detained some of these activists and sent a large number of Arab soldiers, especially the high ranking officers in the army, the revolutionary guards, and the armed security troops, outside the province to prevent them from being influenced by the national, political and cultural revival in Arabistan.

In addition, the conservatives have relied on the policy of moving Persians to Al-Ahwaz and preventing the reverse migration of the Persians residing in Arabistan. A large number of Persians have begun to return to their hometowns in other parts of Iran in order to escape from the unsafe, continually deteriorating living conditions in Al-Ahwaz.

Moreover, local authorities in the area continue to enforce the policy of prohibiting the use of the Arabic language in government and administrative offices. They are also not allowing the use of Arabic names for newborn babies, except in the case of ordinary religious names.

In the midst of all these chaotic policies and competition between the two ruling circles in Tehran, and in the shadow of the dubious Iranian political atmosphere, it seems that there is no other alternative for the Ahwazi Arab people, but to wait for the political and ideological struggle in Tehran to reach its conclusion. It is then that the “victorious”

faction can indicate the path it intends to follow in addressing the just cause of our (Arab) people in Al-Ahwaz (Arabistan).

\*\*Article taken from *Al-Moshahid Assiyasi* vol. 7, issue # 271, 20-26 May 2001.