

AHWAZI ARABS AND INTERNATIONAL ACTION ON IRAN



A survey of Ahwazi Arab opinion on sanctions and the threat of unilateral and multilateral military action on Iran in response to its failure to fulfill its IAEA obligations

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Executive summary

- Consensus against any Israeli military action on Iran as counter-productive
- Sanctions are not harming the livelihoods of Ahwazi Arabs and could speed up the fall of the regime
- Any military action should aim at regime change, rather than simply removing the nuclear programme, and should involve Ahwazi groups in strategic planning
- There should be international support, including financial assistance, for the Ahwazi struggle for self-determination and the rights of all ethno-national groups in Iran

Introduction

The UN approved a fourth round of sanctions on Iran in June 2010 (UNSC 1929), including restrictions on financial transactions, a tighter arms embargo and the authority to seize cargo suspected of being used for Iranian nuclear or missile programmes. These were followed by yet more sanctions approved by the US Congress, which will force 'banks, insurers, energy firms and others to choose: trade with Iran and you will be barred from business with the United States'. In July 2012, the EU enforced its oil embargo on Iran and froze the Central Bank of Iran's assets.

Tougher sanctions mean trade finance is even harder to obtain when dealing with Iran, forcing the country to seek more difficult and innovative ways to bypass the sanctions or demand cash up front. This poses major difficulties for Iranian trade and inward investment. The economy is contracting, inflation is rising fast and the rial has collapsed in value.

It is clear that the regime has been able to face down the "green movement" challenge led by so-called reformists within the establishment and continues to tighten its grip on civil society throughout Iran. At present, any opposition to the Iranian regime has been neutralized in the face of overwhelming violent oppression, although unrest is growing over the state of the economy and the denial of political liberties. Ahwazi Arabs are at the forefront of that resistance, suffering a higher rate of political executions and extra-judicial killings than any other community.

The Ahwazi Arab Solidarity Network (AASN) conducted a survey of Ahwazi Arab opposition groups and activists on the issue international response to Iran's nuclear programme. The Ahwazi opposition is comprised of a number of disparate groups. Among those surveyed are the Ahwazi Democratic Popular Front (ADPF, a secessionist, secular socialist party), the Democratic Solidarity Party of Al-Ahwaz (DSPA, a federalist secular liberal party), the National Liberation Movement of Al-Ahwaz (NLMA, a secessionist party that advocates moderate Islam against what it sees as an extremist regime), the British Ahwazi Friendship Society (BAFS) advocacy group and leading intellectuals and opinion-formers within the Ahwazi Diaspora. These groups have different ideas about the future of Al-Ahwaz or Arabistan, an autonomous Arab region until 1925.

The central differences within the Ahwazi movement are whether to seek an independent state or greater autonomy within Iran, whether or not to wage a guerrilla armed struggle and the position of religion within this struggle, with some groups advocating a separation of state and religion and others urging conversion to Sunnism as an integral part of affirming Arab identity.

However, on the issue of the response to Iran's nuclear programme, there are areas of consensus that the international community should heed. Living in an oil-rich region, the impoverished and persecuted Ahwazi Arab minority will play a crucial role in regime change and they deserve to be heard.



SANCTIONS

There is broad support among Ahwazi groups for the toughest possible sanctions regime against the Iran government, including sanctions that would effectively shut down the Iranian economy to foreign trade. Ahwazi groups are unanimous in their opinion that sanctions are having no negative impact on the welfare of Ahwazi Arabs, who are already suffering long-standing economic and social marginalisation. There is broad support for the EU's oil embargo and a sense that the international community should go further in using sanctions to penalize human rights abuse and facilitate democratic change.

The DSPA states that the current sanctions regime had a "serious impact on the development of Iran's nuclear programme" and added that "we are pretty sure that the majority of political activists in Al-Ahwaz support sanctions against Tehran." It added that "the Ahwazis suffer deprivation rarely seen in the world and for decades have suffered economic sanctions imposed by the regime on their cultural, political, social and economic life." The ADPF is more skeptical about the effects of sanctions, stating that they "believe that sanctions won't work with this regime". It adds that it "we do not support any negotiation with this regime, which will prolong its life and make it stronger."

The NLMA calls for a toughening of the sanctions regime, including a naval blockade to prevent all oil exports in order to bankrupt the Iranian government and destroy its ability to oppress its own people particularly non-Persian ethnic groups, wreck its nuclear programme and undermine its support for international terrorism. In its list of demands, the NLMA effectively calls for a complete trade embargo including sanctions against any state trading with Iran using military enforcement, including a naval blockade of its sea ports and closure of all banking operations. The NLMA acknowledged that "undoubtedly there are negative effects on the lives of the people of Ahwaz Arab due to these international sanctions, but our people will welcome them so long as they lead to the legitimate demand for an independent Ahwazi state their national rights, working in accordance with international law [...] and in the interest of international peace and security."

Prominent Ahwazi journalist and commentator Hamed al-Kanani remarked that Ahwazi Arabs are unaffected in material terms by the sanctions due to their marginal status. While he supported the current sanctions regime, he said it has not been effective in preventing the development of the Iranian nuclear programme and on its own will not topple the regime just as sanctions failed to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. He added that "the previous Iraqi regime was not overthrown by the Iraqis themselves. If the US and other Western countries were not [militarily] engaged, the regime would still be in power."

BAFS criticized the overwhelming emphasis on nuclear proliferation at the expense of human rights and good governance. It called for Western "investment" in Ahwazi Arab NGOs to build a stronger civil society that is better able to bring the regime to account.

MILITARY ACTION

The prospect of unilateral Israeli military action or strikes aimed at the nuclear sites is regarded with deep cynicism by Ahwazi groups. There is a consensus that unilateral action would be ineffective and that attacks by Israel tend to make its enemies stronger. Hamed al-Kannani points to the 2006 Lebanon War, which “made the terrorist group [Hezbollah] stronger than before.” He points out that the high levels of unemployment, drug abuse due to social despair, environmental destruction and everyday anti-Arab racism

The NLMA believes any Israeli strike would be limited and would not lead to the toppling of the regime and therefore would have no positive impact on the liberation of Al-Ahwaz or other non-Persian peoples. It makes a parallel with the Israeli strike on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, which had no impact on the regime itself. It also points out the potential that an Israeli strike would simply escalate the security threats to Israel in the form of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories while Israel has no leverage to threaten the territorial sovereignty of Iran. Moreover, it would “lead to a large public outcry in the Muslim world and Iran would be perceived as a hero, which would act in its favour.”

The DSPA shares this sentiment and states that an “Israeli strike would strengthen the regime politically as many Muslim countries in the area will find a religious motive to stand with the Iranian regime.” It believes that “if a military strike is the only solution to get rid of the Iranian regime then it would be better if it were carried out by NATO without Israeli involvement.”

The DSPA stated that it would support a full invasion of Iran aimed at regime change in order to overthrow the oppressor of Ahwazi Arabs. The NLMA emphasizes that a decisive and quick war against the regime would be achievable simply by usurping Iranian control of Al-Ahwaz, which contains most of its oil production and therefore its main source of revenue. It believes that independence for Al-Ahwaz would establish peace in the Middle East and worldwide.

BAFS warned that military action comes with significant risks that should be thoroughly assessed along with careful planning of post-war scenarios. It pointed to the years of chaos following the invasion of Iraq due to an overly optimistic belief that a stable democratic system could be created from nothing and would be immune from corruption, terrorism and foreign intrigue.

“Any risk assessment needs to be conducted with the involvement of a diversity of civil society groups in Iran. As they live in the most oil-rich and geopolitically sensitive area of Iran, Ahwazi Arabs should be central to any consultation over strategic military planning, particularly if action is aimed at regime change,” BAFS responded. “Military action may be initially intended to take out sites involved in the nuclear programme and perhaps some command and control centres. However, any initial strike of any scale carries with it the potential for all-out war that will include the unconventional methods Iran and its Hezbollah ally have mastered, including the use of terror cells in Arab and European states. As such, we urge Western military commanders to engage in consultation with Ahwazi human rights and opposition groups to tap their knowledge well ahead of any assault.”

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