

# How Iran's Ahwazi Arabs, betrayed, fell victim to oppression that continues to this day

Wed, 2022-01-05 22:11

LONDON: In November 1914, Sheikh Khazaal, the last ruler of the autonomous Arab state of Arabistan, could have been forgiven for thinking the troubles of his people were over.

Oil had been discovered on his lands, promising to transform the fortunes of the Ahwazi people, and Britain stood ready to guarantee their right to autonomy. In reality, the troubles of the Ahwazi were just beginning.

Within a decade, Sheikh Khazaal was under arrest in Tehran, the name Arabistan had been wiped from the map, and the Ahwazi Arabs of Iran had fallen victim to a brutal oppression that continues to this day.

For centuries, Arab tribes had ruled a large tract of land in today's western Iran. Al-Ahwaz, as their descendants know it today, extended north over 600 km along the east bank of the Shatt Al-Arab, and down the entire eastern littoral of the Gulf, as far south as the Strait of Hormuz.



However, the independent status of Arabistan was struck a blow in 1848 by the geopolitical maneuverings of its powerful neighbors. With the Treaty of Erzurum, the Ottoman empire agreed to recognize "the full sovereign rights of the Persian government" to Arabistan. The Arab tribes whose lands were so

casually signed away were not consulted.

Within 10 years, however, Sheikh Khazaal's predecessor, Sheikh Jabir, had found a powerful friend – the British Empire.

Trade in the Gulf was vital for Britain's interests in India and Sheikh Jabir was seen as a valuable ally, especially after his support for the British during the short Anglo-Persian war of 1856-1857 in which Britain repelled Tehran's attempts to seize Herat in neighboring Afghanistan.

Keen to maintain Afghanistan as a buffer, the British had backed the emir of Herat's independence. Now, it seemed, Queen Victoria's government meant to do the same for the sheikh of Arabistan.

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The British opened a vice-consulate at Mohammerah in 1888. By 1897, by which time Sheikh Khazaal had become the ruler of what the British referred to as the Sheikhdome of Mohammerah, imperial Britain was heavily invested in Arabistan.

As a British Foreign Office summary of dealings with Sheikh Khazaal put it, "an essential part of British policy in the Gulf was the establishment of good relations and the conclusion of treaties with the various Arab rulers, and the sheikhs of Mohammerah, controlling territory at the head of the Gulf, thus came very prominently into the general scheme."

With the might of the British at his back, Sheikh Khazaal appeared to be steering Arabistan toward a bright, independent future.

But, in 1903, the Shah of Iran, Muzaffar Al-Din, formally recognized the lands as his in perpetuity. Then, in 1908, vast reserves of oil were found on the sheikh's land at Masjid-i-Sulaiman.



By 1897, by which time Sheikh Khazaal (pictured) had become the ruler of what the British referred to as the Sheikdom of Mohammerah, imperial Britain was heavily invested in Arabistan. (Supplied)

In 1910, after a minor clash between Arabistan and Ottoman forces on the Shatt Al-Arab, Britain sent a warship to Mohammerah, "to counteract a certain amount of loss of prestige suffered by the sheikh and also to make a demonstration in face of the growth of Turkish ambitions in the Arabian Gulf

area.”

On board was Sir Percy Cox, the British political resident in the Gulf. In a ceremony at the Palace of Fallahiyah on Oct. 15, 1910, he presented the sheikh with reassurances of Britain’s steadfast support, and the insignia and title of a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire.

In 1914, in a letter from Sir Percy, the sheikh had in his hand what amounted to a pledge by the greatest imperial power of the time to preserve his autonomy and protect Arabistan from the Persian government.

In the letter, dated Nov. 22, 1914, the British envoy wrote that he was now authorized “to assure your excellency personally that whatever change may take place in the form of the government of Persia, His Majesty’s government will be prepared to afford you the support necessary for obtaining a satisfactory solution, both to yourself and to us, in the event of any encroachment by the Persian government on your jurisdiction and recognized rights, or on your property in Persia.”

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In fact, all of Britain’s assurances would prove worthless and, just 10 years later, Arabistan’s hopes of independence would be shattered.

The problem was oil. The Arabs had it, the Persians wanted it. And when it came to the crunch, the British, despite all their promises of support, chose to back the Persians.

Britain’s change of heart was triggered by the Russian revolution of 1917, after which it became clear that the Bolsheviks had designs on Persia. In 1921, fearing that the failing Persian Qajar dynasty might side with Moscow, Britain conspired with Reza Khan, the leader of Persia’s Cossack Brigade, to stage a coup.

Reza Khan, as a British report of 1946 would later concede, “was ultimately personally responsible for the sheikh’s complete downfall.”

In 1922, Reza Khan threatened to invade Arabistan, which he now regarded as the Persian province of Khuzestan. His motive, as US historian Chelsi Mueller concluded in her 2020 book “The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict,” was clear.



In a ceremony at the Palace of Fallahiyah on Oct. 15, 1910, he presented the sheikh with reassurances of Britain's steadfast support, and the insignia and title of a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire. (Supplied)

"He eyed Arabistan not only because it was the only remaining province that had not yet been penetrated by the authority of central government but also because he had come to appreciate the potential of Arabistan's oil industry to provide much-needed revenues," Mueller wrote.

Sheikh Khazaal asked for Britain's protection, invoking the many assurances he had been given. Instead, he was brushed off, and reminded of his "obligations to the Persian government."

Time was running out for the Arabs. In a despatch sent to London on Sept. 4, 1922, Sir Percy Loraine, British envoy to Iran, wrote "it would be preferable to deal with a strong central authority rather than with a number of local rulers" in Persia. This, he added, "would involve a loosening of our relations with such local rulers."

In August 1924, the Persian government informed Sheikh Khazaal that the pledge of autonomy he had won from Muzaffar Al-Din in 1903 was no longer valid. The sheikh appealed to the British for help, but was again rebuffed.

Reza Khan demanded the sheikh's unconditional surrender. It was, the British concluded, "clear that the old regime had come to an end and that Reza Khan, having established a stranglehold over Khuzestan, would be unlikely ever voluntarily to relinquish it."

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The British government was “now in an embarrassing position” because of “the services which the sheikh had rendered them in the past.” Nevertheless, for fear of Russian incursion in Persia, Britain had now decided firmly to support the central government in Tehran.

The Ahwazi were on their own.

On April 18, 1925, Sheikh Khazaal and his son, Abdul Hamid, were arrested and taken to Tehran, where the last ruler of Arabistan would spend the remaining 11 years of his life under house arrest. The name “Arabistan” was expunged from history and the territories of the Ahwaz finally absorbed into Persian provinces.

Khazaal’s last days were spent in futile negotiations with Tehran, marked, the British noted, by a series of “gross breaches of faith on the part of the central government, which had obviously no intention of carrying out the promises given to the sheikh.”

The Persians, concluded the British, “were obviously merely waiting for the sheikh to die.” That wait ended during the night of May 24, 1936.

In the almost 100 years since the Ahwazi people lost their autonomy, they have experienced persecution and cultural oppression in almost every walk of life. Dams divert water from the Karun and other rivers for the benefit of Persian provinces of Iran, Arabic is banned in schools, while the names of towns and villages have long been Persianized. On world maps, the historic Arab port of Mohammerah became Khorramshahr.

Protests are met with violent repression. Countless citizens working to keep the flame of Arab culture alive have been arrested, disappeared, tortured, executed or gunned down at checkpoints.

Many Ahwazi who sought sanctuary overseas are working to bring the plight of the Ahwazi to the attention of the world. Even in exile, however, they are not safe.



Ahmad Mola Nissi, one of the founders of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz, fled Iran with his wife and children and sought asylum in the Netherlands in 2005. (Supplied)

In 2005, Ahmad Mola Nissi, one of the founders of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz, fled Iran with his wife and children and sought asylum in the Netherlands. On Nov. 8, 2017, he was shot dead outside his home in the Hague by an unknown assassin.

In June 2005, Karim Abdian, director of a Virginia-based NGO, the Ahwaz Education and Human Rights Foundation, appealed to the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

The Ahwazi, he said, had been subjected to “political, cultural, social and economic subjugation, and are treated as second and third-class citizens,” both by the Iranian monarchy in the past and by the current clerical regime. Nevertheless, they still had “faith in the international community’s ability to present a just and a viable solution to resolve this conflict peacefully.”

Sixteen years later, Abdian despairs of seeing any improvement in the position of his people. “I don’t see any way out currently,” he told Arab News, though he dreams of self-determination for the Ahwazi in a federalist Iran.

In the meantime, “as an Ahwazi Arab, you cannot even give your child an Arabic name. So, this nation, which owns the land that currently produces 80 percent of the oil, 65 percent of the gas and 35 percent of the water of Iran, lives in abject poverty.”



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## [UN says 'following with concern'](#) [Houthi seizure of UAE-flagged ship,](#) [urges restraint](#)

Wed, 2022-01-05 20:28

NEW YORK: The UN said on Wednesday that it is "following with concern" reports that a UAE-flagged cargo ship had been seized by the Houthi militia.

"While the circumstances around the incident remain unclear, we are following with concern the reports of the seizure by Houthis of a vessel flying the flag of the UAE in what the Houthis have described as 'Yemeni waters,'" the spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Stephane Dujarric said.

Dujarric called on all countries in the region to exercise restraint and and "refrain from taking any escalatory action."



He continued: "We reaffirm the need to respect the rights and obligations related to maritime navigation in accordance with international law."

He also urged all Yemeni parties to engage with the UN's Yemen envoy Hans Grundberg in order "to advance the political process to reach a comprehensive and negotiated settlement to end the conflict in the country."

UAE-flagged Rawabi was hijacked off the Yemeni port city of Hodeidah by armed Houthis on Sunday, the Arab coalition said on Monday.

It had been transporting medical equipment from the remote Yemeni island of Socotra in the Arabian Sea to the Saudi port of Jazan, the coalition added.



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Houthis suffer fresh blows in Shabwa as government forces capture military base

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# US-led coalition comes under fire in Iraq and Syria

Wed, 2022-01-05 20:22

BAGHDAD: Bases used by the US-led coalition fighting the Daesh group came under fire Wednesday in Iraq and Syria but without causing any casualties, officials said, the latest of several attacks.

Attacks targeting installations hosting coalition forces have come as Tehran and its allies across the Middle East held emotional commemorations marking the second anniversary on Monday of the assassination of Iranian commander General Qasem Soleimani and his Iraqi lieutenant in a US drone strike at Baghdad airport.

The US said at the time that Soleimani was planning imminent action against US personnel in Iraq, a country long torn between the competing demands of its principal allies Washington and Tehran.

On Wednesday evening, five rockets targeted an air base used by the coalition in western Iraq.

"We observed five rounds... the closest impact was two kilometers (1.2 miles) away," a coalition official said Wednesday. "No damage, no casualties."

The rockets landed near the Ain Al-Asad air base in the desert of Al-Anbar province. The same base was targeted on Tuesday, when US-led coalition forces shot down two armed drones.

On Monday, the coalition also shot down two armed drones targeting a compound attached to a US diplomatic base at the airport in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital.

Photos obtained by AFP showed remains of one of the drones with the message "commanders' revenge operations" written on it.

The January 3, 2020 strike, ordered by then-US president Donald Trump, hit a car in which Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis were traveling on the edge of the airport.

Five days after his killing, Iran fired missiles at an air base in Iraq housing US troops and another near Irbil in the country's north.

Since then dozens of rockets and roadside bombs have targeted US security, military and diplomatic sites across Iraq.

Western officials have blamed hard-line pro-Iran factions for the attacks, which have never been claimed.

The Hashed Al-Shaabi – a coalition of former paramilitary groups now integrated into the Iraqi state security apparatus – has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of US troops deployed in Iraq as part of the coalition. Muhandis was deputy leader of the Hashed at the time of his killing.

Coalition troops switched to a training and advisory role with the end of their combat mission in Iraq early last month.

Also on Wednesday, the coalition said one of its bases in northeast Syria came under fire from Iran-backed groups.

"Coalition forces were targeted this morning by eight rounds of indirect fire at Green Village" base, a statement said.

“The attack did not cause any casualties, but several rounds impacted inside the coalition base and caused minor damage.”

The day before, the forces said they had foiled a rocket attack on the same base, located in a part of war-ravaged Syria under the control of Kurdish forces.

Earlier Wednesday, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said pro-Iran militia fighters fired shells toward a US base in eastern Syria’s Al-Omar oil field, causing damage but no casualties.

However, the coalition said it hadn’t received reports of new attacks.

Daesh, which established a so-called caliphate across swathes of Syria and Iraq from 2014, was defeated in Iraq in 2017 by national forces and the coalition that has included more than 80 countries.

However, Daesh remnants still carry out attacks against security forces and civilians.



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Two drones shot down targeting Iraq base: anti-Daesh coalitionIran-backed armed factions rally in Iraq for anniversary of warlord’s death

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# Tunisian political crisis deepens

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-04 23:36

TUNIS: Detained Tunisian ex-justice minister Nouredine Bhiri of the Islamist-inspired Ennahda party, who is refusing food or medication after his transfer to hospital, is suspected of “terrorism,” the interior minister said Monday.

Bhiri, deputy president of Ennahda – viewed by President Kais Saied as an enemy – was arrested by plainclothes officers on Friday and his whereabouts were initially unknown.

Ennahda had played a central role in Tunisian politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied last year. Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago, but civil society groups and Saied’s opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism a decade after the revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

“There were fears of acts of terrorism targeting the country’s security and we had to act,” Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine said late Monday of the arrest.

A member of a delegation that visited Bhiri in hospital said on Monday that he was refusing food or medication.

On Sunday activists and a former Ennahda legislator said Bhiri was in a critical condition and facing death.

But the source told AFP that Bhiri, 63, is “not in critical condition for the time being.”

The source, asking not to be named, said that a joint team from Tunisia’s independent anti-torture group INPT and the United Nations rights commission visited Bhiri at hospital in the northern town of Bizerte on Sunday. He is “lively and lucid,” and being kept under close observation in a private room of the hospital’s cardiology ward.

Since Friday, however, Bhiri has “refused to take any food or medication, prompting his transfer to hospital” two days later, the source said.

Samir Dilou, a lawyer and ex-Ennahda MP, condemned Bhiri’s arrest as “political” and an abuse of the justice system. He told a Tunis news conference that he is lodging a “kidnapping” charge against Saied and Interior Minister Charfeddine.

The interior minister said late Monday that evidence had been sent to the Justice Ministry regarding Bhiri’s activities, but that the prosecution “delayed” action on the matter.

This, Charfeddine said, prompted him to “quickly apply ... judicial control”

over Bhiri, in a context where he was suspected of “falsifying” identity papers, including for a Syrian woman.

The minister said he had “personally verified” that the detainee was being “treated well.”

Bhiri’s wife, Saida Akremi, also a lawyer, told reporters he had suffered “a heart attack,” and that she was being denied access to him because she refused to sign documents as demanded by security services.

Mondher Ounissi, a doctor and member of Ennahdha’s executive bureau, said on Sunday that Bhiri suffers from several chronic illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension.

He has been “deprived of his medication” and “his life is threatened,” Ounissi said, adding that Bhiri usually takes 16 pills a day.

The Interior Ministry on Friday said that two individuals had been ordered under house arrest, without identifying them.

It said the move was a “preventive measure dictated by the need to preserve national security.”

The anti-torture group INPT has identified the second person detained as Fathi Baldi, a former interior ministry official.

The president “bears full responsibility for the life of Mr. Bhiri,” the anti-Saied group “Citizens against the coup” said Sunday on Twitter.



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Tunisia launches national consultation on reforms  
Senior Ennahdha party official held in Tunisia: lawyer

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## [Israel to start reopening to foreigners even as omicron surges](#)

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-04 22:56

JERUSALEM: Israel said it will admit foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity from countries deemed medium-risk next week, partially reversing a ban imposed in late November in response to the fast-spreading omicron variant.

The change suggests Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government sees waning value in sweeping travel curbs – which wrecked winter tourism – as domestic coronavirus cases surge.

The Health Ministry said that, as of Jan. 9, foreign travelers from 199 “orange” countries will be admitted if they can prove they are vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19.

Orange-listed countries include Australia, Italy and Ireland. The ministry recommended that South Africa, Nigeria, Spain, Portugal, France and Canada, among 16 countries listed as “red” or high COVID-19 risk, be changed to “orange.”

The announcement came even as Bennett predicted that new cases could increase tenfold within days. The rapid pace of infection has led to many Israelis waiting hours in lines for COVID-19 tests, although omicron has not brought corresponding rises in mortality.

Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz said Israel would adjust its criteria for compulsory testing and focus primarily on people at high risk. Subsequently, more Israelis “will be required to exercise personal responsibility and perform tests at home,” he said in televised remarks.

The government's strategy is focused on vaccinations, with a fourth dose – or second booster – offered to vulnerable cohorts. Within a day of making it available, 100,000 people received or made an appointment to get the second booster.

“I closed the skies five weeks ago when everything was good,” Bennett said in a televised address on Sunday, referring to Israel’s Nov. 25 ban on most travel to and from red-listed countries after omicron was first detected abroad.

“And, over the coming week, it would be reasonable for us to reopen anew.”

The US, Britain, the UAE, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey remain on Israel’s red list, the Health Ministry said. Visitors from those countries require advance special permission from an Israeli committee to enter.

Israel has also scaled down precautionary self-isolation periods for people who have been exposed to COVID-19 carriers, concerned that mass quarantining could paralyze the economy.



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Israel begins fourth COVID-19 jab for over 60s, health workers  
Israel to admit some foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity as of Jan. 9