

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Iranian Arab Soccer Pitch Emerges as Flashpoint in Saudi-Iranian Proxy War**

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A soccer pitch in the Iranian city of Ahvaz, home to Iran's Arab minority, has emerged as a flashpoint of anti-government protest at a time of rising Arab-Iranian tensions over the status of Shiite Muslim minorities in the Arab world, the crisis in Yemen, and the outlines of a multilateral agreement that would curb Iran's nuclear program and return the Islamic republic to the fold of the international community.

Soccer fans clashed with security forces after a match between state-owned Foolad FC and Teheran's Esteghlal FC in Ahwaz, the capital of the Iranian province of Khuzestan for the second time in as many weeks, according to the National Council of Resistance in Iran, a coalition of opposition groups dominated by the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, a group that lost much of its credibility after it was expelled from France in 1986 and moved its operations to Iraq at a time that Iraq was at war with Iran.

The protest was sparked by mounting anger among ethnic Arabs in oil-rich but impoverished Khuzestan that constitutes part of Iran's border with Iraq. Ethnic Arabs have long complained that the government has failed to reinvest profits to raise the region's standards of living.

The World Health Organization (WHO) identified Ahwaz in 2013 as Iran's most polluted city. Authorities distributed in February tens of thousands of surgical masks and more than 26,000 gallons of milk in Ahwaz, a city of more than 1 million, when it was hit by a severe sand storm that forced the closure of schools and offices, the cancellation of flights, and prompted scattered protests.

In a sign of where Iranian Arab loyalties lie, environmental activists blamed Iraq rather than the Iranian government for the degradation of Khuzestan that they said was a consequence of Iraq's failure to prevent the loss of marshlands and the spread of desert terrain.

Iranian Arabs nevertheless charge that they are being discriminated against because of Iranian government suspicions that they are susceptible to foreign Arab influence. That suspicion is rooted in Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's bloody eight-year war against Iran that ended in 1988. Saddam falsely expected at the time that Iranian Arabs would welcome the opportunity to gain independence from Iran.

The Iranian Arab refusal to side with Saddam failed however to earn them the credit they deserved. They have since often framed their criticism of government policies in ethnic and nationalist terms that have served to strengthen government distrust amid multiple proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the battlefields of Yemen, Syria and Iraq; Gulf accusations of meddling by Iran in their backyard by supporting the rebel Houthis in Yemen, fuelling protest in majority Shiite Bahrain and the oil-rich, predominantly Eastern Shiite militias in Iraq battling the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq.

A policeman was killed and 30 protesters injured when police allegedly attacked the Shiite village of Awamiyah in the Eastern Province amid reports of a planned demonstration against the Saudi military intervention in Yemen, according to the Saudi interior ministry and activists. Shiites, who assert that they suffer from discrimination in employment and education, account for up to 15 percent of the kingdom's population. The government has repeatedly rejected allegations of discrimination and claimed that it was confronting an armed uprising in the Eastern Province.

In a recent article in the English-language Saudi newspaper, Arab News, UAE businessman Khalaf Ahmad Al Habtoor called for the liberation of the five million Arabs in Khuzestan which the writer described as Arabistan. Al Habtoor asserted that the Arabs were "struggling to survive under the Persian yoke in an Arab region bordering Iraq and the Arabian Gulf."

He charged that "although Arabistan provides Iran with 80 percent of its oil requirements as well as half of its gas, its sons are exploited and oppressed; their human rights trampled upon, their very identity in danger of being obliterated. Iran's policy of ethnic discrimination combined with its Persian resettlement endeavours has resulted in turning the Ahwazi Arabs into an economic and social underclass.

Numerous Arab villages are without schools and those 'lucky' enough to attend school are educated in Farsi. Some 80 percent of Ahwazi Arab women are illiterate as opposed to 50 percent of Ahwazi men. Over thirty percent of the under-30s are unemployed in this heavily

industrialized region, primarily because Persians receive priority and jobs often advertised outside the governorate,” Al Habtoor said.

“Thousands are without access to drinking water, because rivers have been diverted to arid Persian provinces. Their streets open to sewers; many are deprived of electricity and gas... It’s no wonder that Ahwazi Arabs are now driven to protest against such blatant discrimination,” he added.

The soccer protest followed a similar incident during an Asian championship League qualifier between Ahwaz’s Foolad FC and Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia. Fans defiantly expressed support for Al Hilal and burnt pictures of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the late spiritual leader who spearheaded the 1979 Iranian revolution that toppled the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Fans also sported banners emphasizing the Arab character of Ahvaz.

Unrest in Ahwaz has been long simmering. The popular revolts of the Arab world in 2011 that toppled the autocratic leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen reverberated in Khuzestan where protesters commemorated anti-government demonstrations in 2005. Activists who called in April 2011 for a ‘day of rage’ in Ahwaz were confronted by security forces who reportedly killed and wounded scores.

Habib Jaber Al-Ahvazi, a spokesperson for the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), a group that demands independence for Ahvaz and is believed to be responsible for a series of bomb attacks in the city in 2005, 2006 and 2013, told online Arab nationalist Ahvaz.tv that the soccer protests were part of an “ongoing confrontation between demonstrators and the forces of the Persian occupation.”

Iranian analysts suspect Saudi Arabia of instigating the soccer protests in Khuzestan as part of an effort to destabilize and dismember Iran. The analysts note that ASMLA operatives have maintained contacts with rebels fighting Syria’s Al Assad regime. ASMLA has also expressed support for insurgents in Iran’s Baluchi and Kurdish provinces whom the government in Tehran sees as part of US and Gulf Arab covert operations aimed at weakening it.

Iran’s Press TV appeared to counter reports of the soccer protest by reporting the same day that hundreds of protesters in Tehran, Ahwaz, Ardabil, Mashhad and Tabriz had demonstrated against the Saudi military campaign in Yemen.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author’s permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/04/iranian-arab-soccer-pitch-emerges-as.html>

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