



PERSPECTIVES

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Iranian Port City Bears Brunt of Crackdown

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Iranian port city of Bandar-e-Mahshahr, which is experiencing great violence during the crackdown on the anti-regime protests, is a microcosm of Iran's broader domestic problems.

The Iranian port city of Bandar-e-Mahshahr has emerged as the [scene of some of the worst violence in Iran's brutal crackdown](#) on recent anti-government protests.

Bandar-e-Mahshahr is located in Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan province, home to the country's restive ethnic Arab minority. The anti-government protests there have been portrayed by the Iranian regime as yet another effort to destabilize the Islamic Republic by the US, Saudi Arabia and/or Israel.

Iranian state television reported that [security forces had confronted a separatist group in the city that was armed with "semi-heavy" weapons](#). It claimed the armed rioters had fought with security personnel for hours.

Iranian exiles in contact with family and friends in Bandar-e-Mahshahr said protesters blocked off a road leading from the city, which is home to Iran's largest petrochemical complex, to the village of Koora.

In contrast to past protests in the province, the protesters chanted slogans against Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani rather than Arab nationalist phrases.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' 3rd Marine Force Division, based on the outskirts of the city, intervened with armored vehicles after police failed to disperse the protesters. The exiles said the Guards opened fire on protesters trying to escape into nearby marshlands.

An [unconfirmed video purportedly documenting the killing of up to 100 people](#) shows armored vehicles driving down a road as multiple rounds are

fired and men are heard shouting. “They simply mowed them down,” said one of the exiles who studied in Bandar-e-Mahshahr and has relatives in the city.

In many ways, the protests in Bandar-e-Mahshahr and multiple other Iranian cities fit a global pattern: a specific issue sparks anti-government demonstrations that quickly evolve into a mass movement demanding a complete overhaul of a political system that has failed to cater to the needs or aspirations of major segments of the population.

In Hong Kong the spark was a law that would enable extraditions to mainland China. In Santiago, Chile, it was public transportation price hikes. In Iran it was a surprise increase of petrol prices.

Struggling under the yoke of harsh US economic sanctions imposed after the Trump administration’s unilateral withdrawal in 2018 from the international agreement that curbed Iran’s nuclear program, Iranian leaders failed to recognize that longstanding mismanagement of the economy and widespread corruption was undermining their legitimacy.

The Tehran regime has used statements in recent years by [American](#), [Saudi](#), and Israeli officials to tout the theory of a US-Saudi-Israeli conspiracy to stoke unrest among Iran’s ethnic minorities. The leadership cites violent incidents in Khuzestan, the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan, and Kurdish regions of Iran to support this theory.

Ayatollah Khamenei’s [insistence that the Iranian protests constituted a “dangerous conspiracy”](#) by the US was hardly surprising.

The protests erupted after weeks in which demonstrators in Iraq [denounced Iranian influence in their country and attacked the Islamic Republic’s consulates in Basra and Najaf](#). Similarly, Lebanon, home to Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia, has been paralyzed for the past two months by anti-sectarian protesters.

The conviction that Iran’s enemies are tightening the noose around its neck may well have some grounding in reality, even if the Islamic Republic’s most recent regional setbacks, as well as the outburst of deep-seated anger at home, cannot be reduced to foreign conspiracies.

The brutality with which the regime cracked down on protesters, as well as its drastic decision to shut down the Internet for four days, suggests that Iran has little faith in Riyadh’s efforts to dial down tension with its arch rival or [Omani efforts to mediate](#).

This could also explain why the squashing of the protests in Bandar-e-Mahshahr has been particularly harsh.

The oil-rich Khuzestan province in which Bandar-e-Mahshahr is located has long been a trouble spot for the Iranian regime. The violent life and death of Ahmad Mola Nissi, a leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA), reflects those troubles. (Ahvaz is the capital of Khuzestan.)

A 52-year-old refugee living in the Netherlands since 2005, Mola Nissi is believed to have been responsible for attacks in Khuzestan in 2005, 2006, and 2013 on oil facilities, the office of the city governor, other government offices, and banks.

Mola Nissi focused in his later years on media activities and fundraising, at times creating footage of alleged attacks involving gas cylinder explosions to attract Saudi funding, according to Iranian activists.

[Unidentified gunmen shot Mola Nissi dead on a street in The Hague](#) in November 2017. He was killed as he was preparing to establish a television station backed by Saudi-trained personnel and funding that was intended to target Khuzestan.

The Ahvaz National Resistance, an Iranian Arab separatist group, claimed responsibility in September 2018 for an attack on a Revolutionary Guards parade in that city in which 29 were killed and 70 wounded.

Protests in Khuzestan have focused in recent years on identity, environmental degradation, and social issues.

International human rights groups have long accused Iran of discriminating against Iranian Arabs even though a majority are Shiite rather than Sunni Muslims. [Dozens of protesters were reportedly killed](#) during demonstrations in Ahwaz in 2011 that were inspired by the popular Arab revolts.

“Despite Khuzestan's natural resource wealth, its ethnic Arab population, which is believed to constitute a majority in the province, has long complained about the lack of socio-economic development in the region. They also allege that the Iranian government has engaged in systematic discrimination against them, particularly in the areas of employment, housing, and civil and political rights,” Human Rights Watch said at the time.

That was in 2011. As in the rest of Iran, things have only gotten worse in Khuzestan since.

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