

Iran: Arrest Sweeps Target Arab Minority

Dozens Held; 2 Have Died in Custody

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(New York) – Iranian security forces arrested more than 65 Arab residents during security sweeps in Iran’s Arab-majority Khuzestan province since late 2011 according to local activists, Human Rights Watch said today. The Iranian government should immediately charge or release those arrested, Human Rights Watch said. Authorities should also investigate reports by local activists that two detainees have died in Intelligence Ministry detention facilities in the past week.

Reports by local activists about security sweeps in the towns of Hamidiyeh, Shush, and Ahvaz indicate that authorities carried out at least some of the arrests in response to anti-government slogans and graffiti spray-painted on public property expressing sympathy for the Arab Spring and calling for a boycott of Iran’s parliamentary elections, scheduled for March 2, 2012. Human Rights Watch received information that Mohammad Kaabi, 34, and Nasser Albshokeh Derafshan, 19, died in detention facilities run by local intelligence officials in Shush and Ahvaz respectively, apparently as a result of torture. The local activists say that most of those arrested are being held in incommunicado detention.

“There has been a blackout inside Iran on this latest round of arrests targeting Arab protesters and activists,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Authorities should immediately divulge the reasons for the arrests, give detainees access to family members and lawyers, bring all detainees promptly before a judge, and hold anyone responsible for torture to account.”

Human Rights Watch expressed concern for those in custody. Based on past government actions some of those arrested could be at imminent risk of execution if they are convicted by revolutionary courts of national security crimes including terrorism or espionage, or face prosecution on such charges. Human Rights Watch is not aware of any charges that have been brought in these cases.

According to several Iranian Arab rights groups, security forces have since November 2011 arrested at least 18 Arab men in Hamidiyeh, 25 kilometers west of Ahvaz, the provincial capital. The first arrest, on November 28, was of the prominent activist Hasan Manabi, an elementary school principal, and his brother Ghabel. A close friend of Hasan Manabi told Human Rights Watch that security and intelligence



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forces had arrested him numerous times since 2005. He said that Manabi, who had told the friend about torture and ill-treatment at the hands of intelligence officials following earlier arrests, had decided in late 2010 to seek asylum in Turkey.

Manabi's friend told Human Rights Watch that the Intelligence Ministry summoned and detained Manabi's wife for several days to pressure him to return to Iran. Manabi returned in September 2011 and introduced himself to intelligence officials in Ahvaz, who interrogated him, then released him after several hours. But on November 28 intelligence agents raided Manabi's home and arrested him and his brother Ghabel. The authorities have since accused Hasan Manabi of spying for the United States and the United Kingdom, in addition to having ties with Arab opposition groups operating in Khuzestan province.

A local Khuzestan activist told Human Rights Watch that the latest round of arrests in Hamidiyeh began when security forces arrested nine Iranian Arabs on January 10 and four more on January 26 and 30. Most are between ages 20 and 28, and some had previously been detained for participating in demonstrations demanding more rights for Iran's ethnic Arab minority. At least one has been released on bail, the local activist said, and several others have since been arrested.

Authorities have also arrested at least 27 people in Shush, 115 kilometers northwest of Ahvaz, in recent weeks. A local activist there said that security forces, including plainclothes members of the Intelligence Ministry, initiated the arrests in response to anti-government slogans and graffiti spray-painted on public property expressing sympathy for the Arab Spring and calling for a boycott of Iran's [parliamentary elections](#), scheduled for March 2. The activist said that security forces set up checkpoints throughout Shush. After they arrested Jasim Kaabi, his daughter Khadijeh, and his son Mohammad in their home on January 21, he said "people became angry and poured into the streets." In response, security forces arrested at least 24 men, most of them in their 20s, on January 25 and 26. The arrests took place in Ahmadabad, Khazireh, Davar, and several villages outside of Shush.

"For about four days [from January 25] Shush was effectively under martial law, which has since been lifted," the activist said. "But the city is still under a heavy security presence."

The local activist told Human Rights Watch that Mohammad Kaabi, who was arrested in Shush on January 21, died in custody at a local Intelligence Ministry detention facility. The local activist confirmed reports from other activists that on February 2 authorities from the Shush Intelligence Ministry office contacted Kaabi's family and informed them that he had died. The official reportedly told the family that authorities had already buried Kaabi's remains and there was no need for funeral services. They warned the family not to conduct a public mourning service for their son.

Prior to news of Kaabi's death, local activists told Human Rights Watch that 19-year-old Nasser Alboshokeh Derafshan had allegedly died after being tortured on January 30 in an Intelligence Ministry detention facility in Ahvaz. A source close to Derafshan's family told Human Rights Watch that security forces arrested Derafshan on January 26 for unknown reasons.

On January 30, agents from Ahvaz's Intelligence Ministry called Derafshan's father and told them to come pick up him up, the source said. When his father arrived at the detention facility, he caught a glimpse of a body inside the ambulance parked there and asked if it was his son, but the authorities denied it. He followed the ambulance to Golestan hospital and discovered that the body in the ambulance was his son's. The source told Human Rights Watch that Derafshan's family saw signs of torture on his body, including bruises on his face, neck, waist, and ribs. The authorities claim that Derafshan died of natural causes.

The source told Human Rights Watch that authorities have so far refused to return Derafshan's body to his family.

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Local activists also told Human Rights Watch that intelligence agents have arrested at least 11 Arab men in and around Ahvaz since February 3. Security forces arrested another 10 Arab men, all of whom are members of the Sunni sect, on January 17, activists said. One of them told Human Rights Watch that security forces, many of them plainclothes agents, are present throughout Ahvaz and the situation there is very tense.

Human Rights Watch has received the names of many of those arrested or killed, but has not been able to verify the circumstances of each arrest due to severe government restrictions on independent monitoring and reporting in the province. Human Rights Watch previously [called](#) on Iranian authorities to allow independent international media and human rights organizations access to investigate allegations of serious rights violations in the province.

“Security operations in Khuzestan province since protests there last April have resulted in the largest number of deaths and injuries since the crackdown that followed the disputed 2009 presidential election,” Stork said. “With the province under an information blackout and the history of secret convictions and executions, we have reason to be very worried about the people the authorities have been snatching up and carrying off there.”

Background

Khuzestan province, where much of Iran’s oil and gas reserves are located, has a large ethnic Arab population believed to number more than 2 million, possibly a majority of residents. Despite Khuzestan’s natural resource wealth, ethnic Arabs have long complained about the lack of socioeconomic development in the region. They also allege that the Iranian government has systematically discriminated against them, particularly in employment, housing, and civil and political rights.

The arrests in Hamidiyeh, Shush, and Ahvaz are the latest in an intense government security and media campaign over several years targeting Khuzestan Arab residents and activists. The government routinely alleges that Arab rights activists and protesters engage in terrorism and espionage, or are tied to armed Arab separatist groups. On December 13, 2011, Press TV, a government English-language station, aired a documentary featuring three Arab men who confessed before the cameras that they had carried out terrorist activities. The program alleged that the men – Hadi Rashedi, Hashem Shaabani, and Taha Heidarian – were part of a group called ‘Khalq-e Arab,’ supported by US and UK interests and foreign-based Iranian Arabs who fronted as human rights activists.

A source who knows both Rashedi and Shaabani told Human Rights Watch that the two men are among more than 10 others from the town of Khalafabad, located about 120 kilometers southeast of Ahvaz, who have been arrested and detained by authorities since January 2011. He said he believes the men were forced to confess to these crimes after being subjected to physical and psychological torture.

In April 2011, Human Rights Watch documented the use of live ammunition by security forces against protesters in cities throughout Khuzestan province, killing dozens and wounding many more. No Iranian official has been held to account for these killings.

Authorities also arrested several hundred demonstrators and rights activists, some of whom are still in detention, and executed at least seven Arab men and a 16-year-old boy in Ahvaz’s Karun prison between May 4 and May 7, Iranian Arab rights groups reported. Local rights activists have told Human Rights Watch that at least some of those executed had been arrested only weeks before, during the April protests. Activists say that at least four others died in custody between March and May. The authorities should open independent and transparent investigations into all alleged killings, Human Rights Watch said.

The April 2011 protests were held to mark the sixth anniversary of 2005 protests in Khuzestan, in which security forces opened fire to disperse demonstrators in Ahvaz and other cities and towns, [killing](#) at least 50 protesters and detaining hundreds. The 2005 crackdown led to a cycle of violence throughout Khuzestan province, including several [bomb attacks](#) in June and October 2005 and January 2006 that killed 12 people. In response, the government imprisoned numerous activists it claimed were Arab separatists responsible for terrorist attacks against civilians and sentenced more than a dozen people to death on terrorism-related charges. Since 2006, authorities have [executed at least 19 Iranians of Arab origin](#).

Names of People Reported Arrested in Khuzestan Province Since November 2011 (provided by local activists)*

Shush: Qasem Badavi, Jaajaa Chenani, Aadel Dabbat, Ahmad Dabbat, Ashur Dabbat, Faisal Dabbat, Kazem Dabbat, Ebrahim Heidari, Hamid Kaabi, Jaafar Kaabi, Jasem Kaabi, Karim Kaabi, Khadijeh Kaabi (female), Mohammad Kaabi (died in detention), Sajjad Kaabi, Ali Kenani, Abbas Khasraji, Mehdi Khasraji, Moslem Mazraavi, Morteza Mousavi, Hasan Navaseri, Mehdi Navaseri, Salar Obeidavi, Amir Sorkhi, Adnan Zoqeibi, Ahmad Zoqeibi, Osman Zoqeibi

Hamidiyeh: Hasan Abiat, Jalil Abiat, Jamal Abiat, Aadel Cheldavi, Adnan Cheldavi, Karim Doheimi, Ali Heidari, Mohammad Adnan Helfi, Ghabel Manabi (arrested November 2011), Hadi Manabi, Hasan Manabi (arrested November 2011), Seyed Faraj Mousavi (released on bail), Heidar Obeidavi, Khaled Obeidavi, Ayoub Saedi, Emad Saedi, Abbas Samer, Eidan Shakhi

Ahvaz (and vicinity): Ahmad Afravi (Sunni), Nasser Alboshokeh Derafshan (died in detention), Majid Bavi (Sunni), Abdolvahid Beit Sayyah (Sunni), Valid Hamadi, Qazi Handali Farhani (Sunni), Jamal Hazbavi (Sunni), Tofiq Heidari, Hamid Khanfari Batrani (Sunni), Hossein Khazraji (Sunni), Said Khazraji (Sunni), Jasem Marvani, Taher Moaviyeh, Mohammad Naami, Seyed Ahmad Nazari (Sunni), Aadel Saedi, Hossein Savari, Ali Sayyahi, Ali Sharifi, Sadoun Silavi, Khalaf Zobeidi (Sunni)

*This list is not exhaustive and Human Rights Watch could not independently verify whether the individuals listed remain in detention.

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