The Ahvas Protests:

Are the minorities' demonstrations a reflection of a crisis in Tehran?

On July 15, Khuzestan in South West Iran witnessed a range of protests against the disintegrating economic and living conditions in the country, particularly the lack of water within the province, which was called 'water protests' or 'thirst protests', This was extended to other Iranian cities outside Khuzestan. The protesters› demands evolved to demand the overthrow of the regime itself raising slogans of 'Death to Khamenei'.

The framework of the protests:

The protests that took place in Ahvas can be traced back to the following reasons:

1- Deliberate policies to 'impoverish' the region: one of the reasons for the protests within Khuzestan province was what the residents of the region considered a systematic policy to prevent the region from exploiting its resources, since Khuzestan is ranked among the 31 richest Iranian provinces with both oil and water.

These demonstrations erupted on the grounds of the Iranian authorities diverting the course of some rivers in the region, including the Karun River, which is the largest of them, to the provinces of Isfahan, Zayander-ud, Yazd and Qom, which are predominantly Persian. This threatens to expose Khuzestan's water scarcity and a decrease in the levels of water required for the cultivation of thousands hectares, possibly resulting in desertification, an increase in dust storms, and extensive environmental and economic harm.

In addition to the water and electricity crisis in several regions in Iran, which caused the eruption of demonstrations in those regions, managing this issue includes several problems, due to entering into unplanned projects resulting in several negative repercussions. One particular example is the Behesh-tabad water transmission tunnel to transport water of Karun River to Isfahan, which was taken over by the Khatam Al-Morsalin group, the economic institution of the Revolutionary Guards.

The Arab residents of the region believe that this project is a deliberate policy on the part of the authorities aiming to displace them to Northern Iran by impoverishing them, despite the enormous natural resources their region possesses.

2- Similar concerns from other minorities: the Ahvas protests seem to have raised concerns among

other minorities, particularly the Kurds, as the Kurdish-majority cities of Marivan, Sinnah and Urmia in Western Iran witnessed protest rallies following the Eid Al-Adha prayer.

The Kurds fear the extension of the water policy practiced by the Iranian authorities in Ahvas to their areas, particularly in light of government decisions reflecting the intentions to divert rivers in Kurdish areas towards rural areas in Tehran. This explains the Kurdish demonstrations in support of the Ahvas protesters.

Azeris in Iran, who reside in West Azerbaijan, also expressed solidarity with the protests, as posters and graffiti in Turkish were spread, calling for the overthrow of the Iranian regime and support for the uprisings in the Ahvas region. The use of the Turkish language was intended by the inhabitants of the Azeri regions in objection to the preference of the Persians over the rest of the ethnic groups within the country.

Protests of other dimensions

These protests erupted in a manner that differed from the demonstrations in 2017, 2018 and 2019, as they reflected several new dimensions, which can be summarized as follows:

1- A critical timing for the Iranian regime: the current protests undoubtedly came at a very significant time for the Iranian regime, just two weeks before the elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office in Tehran. He is the president who is supposed to face major contentious files relevant to the critical economic situation.

These protests also coincided with what is supposed to be the last stage of the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group in Vienna over Tehran's nuclear program. This requires the Iranian authorities to have a coherent internal front, and for the regime to deal with the protests calmly by resorting to contain any threats to its stability.

2- Territorial and temporal expansion of the protests: despite the outbreak of demonstrations in Khuzestan, several other Iranian provinces have expressed their solidarity with those marches. At least 31 protests were organized across Iran, including marches for workers and farmers. This also spread to major provinces such as Tehran and Mashhad,

where media reports showed that the Azadi Square that is considered a symbolic place for supporters of the Iranian regime in Central Tehran. It witnessed a massive demonstration by the people of the Arab Ahvaz region, including students and displaced people in Tehran.

Eyewitnesses from the Arab-majority 'Dawlatabad' district in Tehran stated that the Iranian security services and anti-riot forces intensified their presence in various parts of the neighborhood, and that the Tehran metro stations witnessed demonstrations carrying slogans against Ali Khamenei.

On the other hand, these protests are constantly renewed and keep expanding, despite the violent security oppression over the demonstrators. While previous demonstrations were usually controlled within a few days, these protests in Ahvas did not subside, even despite the retreat of the security forces stationed near the demonstration squares in the cities of Khuzestan.

3- Khamenei's justification of the protests: it has been customary to confront the public and factional protests in Khuzestan with accusations of treason on the grounds that the region includes an Arab majority against the Persian majority controlling the functions of the state in Iran. It was remarkable that Ali Khamenei's reaction was one of containment, as he admitted the existence of a problem in the region, and demanded that officials quickly solve it.

Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad expressed his solidarity with the protesters' demands, criticizing the government's policy that deprives the region of investments and development. Furthermore, Former President Mohammad Khatami criticized the policy of repression against peaceful demonstrators, and called for a serious consideration of their demands.

Scenarios of dealing with the protests

There are several scenarios regarding how the Iranian authorities deal with the protests in Ahvas, which can be illustrated as follows:

1- The scenario of escalation: the Iranian authorities may resort back to the path of escalation. At the beginning of the demonstrations, reports recorded that the Iranian authorities confronted the demon-

strations using violent methods, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 10 people, including at least one police officer, as well as the injury of more than 200 people in 7 different cities.

Social media users expressed a noticeable interest in the protests, and called for organizing rallies in different squares and cities, as well as highlighting the violence used by the security services against demonstrators. Additionally, hashtags in support of the protests, such as "# Ahvaz Are Rising Up", and "# Peacefully_Secure" appeared on the Twitter platform, which was addressed by the authorities in Tehran by cutting off internet services in most cities of Khuzestan as well as blocking social networking sites over mobile phones.

Furthermore, Hossein Salami's visit for the region on July 24 reveals the continuation of the security option in addressing the protests, particularly in light of the statements made by Hossein Amirabdollahian, the Special Aide to the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament on international affairs. He ignored the real reasons behind the demonstrations, and attributed them to 'inciters of riots' and 'enemies of the revolution'. Furthermore, some Iranian officials blame US sanctions for causing these protests, as they impede the im-

plementation of many development plans within the region. Thus, the real causes of the demonstrations remain unaddressed.

On the other hand, international criticism, whether by human rights organizations or by the US State Department, and their calls for Iranian security forces to put an end to the violence and arbitrary detention of protesters, will have no impact on Iranian policies.

2- Adopting the appeasement approach: Iran may resort to responding to the protesters' demands for the purpose of calming demonstrations. Ali Khamenei expressed this direction, when he demanded officials to take quick action in solving the problems of Khuzestan. The Iranian president laid the blame on the high temperatures and the decline in rainfall. This indicates the attempts of both to accommodate public anger without addressing the root causes of the problem.

3- Responding to the demands of the demonstrators: the option of going back on the plans to divert water seems to be unlikely, given that under the pressure of the current protests, Rouhani pledged to open the dams for drinking water, a proposal the implementation of which has been slow.

In conclusion, it can be said that the current policies of the state and the pursuit of segregation and discrimination against minorities in general and the Ahwazi Arabs in particular, may portend a social explosion within Iran. This is reinforced by the aggravated economic conditions, and the demonstrators' keenness to undermine the symbols of the Iranian regime, particularly its Supreme Leader, which reflects a continued deterioration in the regime's popularity.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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