



**Witness Statement of Jalel Sherhani**

**Name:** Jalel Sherhani  
**Place of Birth:** Ahvaz/Ahwaz, Iran  
**Date of Birth:** January 21, 1969  
**Occupation:** Self-employed

---

**Interviewing Organization:** Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

**Date of Interview:** September 25, 2012

**Interviewer:** IHRDC Staff

---

This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Jalel Sherhani. It was approved by Jalel Sherhani on April 17, 2013. There are 63 paragraphs in the statement.

The views and opinions of the witness expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.

## Statement

### Background

1. My name is Jalel Sherhani. I was born in Ahwaz<sup>1</sup> on January 21, 1969. Before leaving Iran, I was self-employed in the informal sector—I will explain later why that was the case. I believe that I faced discrimination from the state not only during my childhood and when I entered school, but even since my birth.

### Discrimination by the Government

2. We were not considered Iranian citizens living in Iran. They should look at [members of the Ahwazi Arab ethnic minority] and our Turkish compatriots in Iran as equal citizens. Maybe the government does not mention this in its official and political documents and articles, but its attitude towards us has always been scornful.
3. When I was in school, my teacher—who was supposed to teach me—laughed at and criticized me when I spoke Persian. It was a terrible experience. When families complained about this issue, their complaints were not answered and they were told that they should teach their children Persian. But if my parents didn't know Persian how could they teach me? This was a form of discrimination. I even faced this kind of treatment in school, [which is supposed to be] a center of culture and education. This caused me a lot of suffering; until today I still do not have a Tehrani or Persian accent. This is not a flaw, but unfortunately it is seen as a defect in society. We tried not to talk [in school]. When we did we were disparaged.
4. I had problems since I started school. My parents and even my three older sisters don't know Persian. They can read Arabic, because in the past there were *maktabs* where the Quran was taught.<sup>2</sup> My sisters learned Arabic in a *maktab* but in contrast, when I entered school at the age of seven I had a teacher who was sent from Tehran to the area where we lived. Since he didn't know Arabic, he was unable to answer our questions.
5. Teachers who were sent [to our region] were usually exiles who used to be members of the Tudeh party or other parties opposed to the Shah.<sup>3</sup> These teachers came to areas that had been dubbed “deprived.” When an area is described as deprived it is not hard to imagine what it looks like. Both the Shah's regime and the Islamic Republic referred to the areas in Khuzestan in which [many Ahwazi Arabs] live as “deprived areas.”
6. As I said, Ahwazi families—I use the term “Ahwaz” because it was common among us to say “Ahwazi” instead of “Khuzestani”—often had to take their children out of school when their children failed for two or three years because they could no longer help them because they could not afford it. And the school, which should provide resources to the families of its students, does not help either. For instance, if they hired Arab teachers who knew both Arabic and Persian and can clarify things that we did not understand or explain the equivalents [of some words or

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ahwaz* is the Arabic pronunciation of *Ahvaz*, a city in southeastern Iran and the capital of Khuzestan province

<sup>2</sup> *Maktabs* were the predominant educational institutions in Iran before the establishment of modern schools. Classes in *maktabs* were instructed by a learned person, often a cleric, teaching the Quran and other subjects to a group of students.

<sup>3</sup> The Tudeh Party was the main communist party in Iran in the mid-twentieth century. It is widely reported that the party was closely linked to the Soviet Union. See *Communism in Persia from 1941 to 1953*, Encyclopedia Iranica, at

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/communism-ii>

concepts] in Arabic, it would be a big help. I remember that our teacher would talk and we would just look at him [and not understand what he was saying]. What could we say?

### **Political Activity**

7. My political activities and those of my relatives were legal.
8. This is as much of the exact story as I know: when the Islamic Republic was established after the revolution, Iranians were hoping for revolutionary change. I was born in 1968 and I was ten years old when the revolution took place in 1978-79.
9. I had to endure my brother's execution that same year. He participated in protests. In our family my brother was the political activist. He was older than me: he was 24 years old when he was executed.
10. His name was Musa Sherhani. He worked in the Ministry of Health, which often sent him to villages as a health care assistant. He began his activities when the protests against the Shah had started. After the revolution, the same discrimination against Arabs in Khuzestan persisted. My brother and his colleagues founded the Arab Cultural Center.
11. My brother was one of the founders of [the local chapter of] the center in Susangerd, which was previously known as Khafajieh, and is still called that by local Arabs.<sup>4</sup> My brother, his friends and some of our relatives, including my cousins, participated in demonstrations to demand more resources for the city and the people living there. At the beginning of the revolution there was no party or group with a specific name, therefore it cannot be said that they joined a party. Their activities were spontaneous. They were reacting to oppression. Anyone who saw oppression participated in the demonstrations. He took part in the protests in Susangerd, where he lived.
12. He had a considerable personal library at home. He bought books, read them, and gave them to his friends. I don't remember exactly what books he had. There were Islamic books that were published in high volume, and also books from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. There were even some books by Sadeq Hedayat,<sup>5</sup> whose books were short. He even gave some books to children in my age group. He was a political and cultural activist. He also worked for the Ministry of Health and even donated his blood to wounded soldiers during the Iran-Iraq War.

### **Arrests of Family Members**

13. Two to three hours before my brother's execution in October 1980 some plainclothes officers entered the home of my uncle—who was about 65 years old at the time—in Susangerd/Khafajieh. Suddenly a group of plainclothes agents entered the house without ringing the bell or knocking on the door. We asked, "What do you want?" They said, "We are Revolutionary Guards and you are counter-revolutionaries and traitors, and you are waging war on God."

---

<sup>4</sup> During the reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941) the names of several Iranian towns were changed. In Khuzestan province, many towns that had Arabic names were given Persian names.

<sup>5</sup> Sadeq Hedayat, (1903-1951), was an Iranian writer whose works had a significant influence on Iran's twentieth century literature. For further information see <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hedayat-sadeq>

14. They introduced themselves as Revolutionary Guards, but didn't show any evidence or ID cards. My uncle asked for their documents because he had previously been arrested and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment during the Shah's reign. He asked them to show a document or a warrant, but unfortunately they didn't listen and took my father, uncle and brother. My father was a farmer who couldn't read or write; my uncle could read Arabic but couldn't read Persian. Both were farmers and had not engaged in any political activity.
15. I was there and I saw what happened with my own eyes. None of them was wearing a military uniform. They were all armed with AK-47s and handguns. There were around 20 or 30 of them surrounding the house.
16. My uncle's daughters and wife, my brother, my uncle, my father and I were home. I remember some of the guards' faces. Sadly, we knew some of them. I say "sadly" because they were our acquaintances. They lived in Khafajieh/Susangerd. Later, we investigated further and found out [more about them].
17. We never forgot their faces. We inquired and found out that some of those who came to our house and arrested my relatives were Arabs. But some of them were not from Khafajieh/Susangerd. We knew two or three of them very well, but I won't mention their names because they apologized later on and said that they were only following orders. We have no enmity against them.
18. I didn't see them using any communication devices. Apart from those who were identified later, the rest called each other by first names, but I don't think they used their real names. They used names like Majid and Hossein. At that time we were very scared. We were just kids and the situation was very troubling.
19. From the moment they arrested my brother and uncle they beat them. They even beat up the women. My uncle's wife threw herself on her husband and they beat her with their hands and the stocks of their guns.
20. When they took them, they didn't handcuff them. But they tied their hands with *chafiyehs*<sup>6</sup>, which are worn by Basijis nowadays. Then they blindfolded them, put them in the car, and left. As far as I remember, they drove a white Toyota, but it was not a military vehicle. There was also a truck, and there were several Shahbaz Jeeps as well. But they did not have military colors. They took them, but we didn't expect that they would be executed, [But] a terrible thing happened to us: two hours after my brother and uncle were arrested they were executed. At that time I was 12 years old.

### Execution of Family Members

21. My brother and uncle were executed in the provincial government building of Susangerd/Khafajieh. [The authorities] executed them in public, and the people who witnessed it informed us. They were executed in front of the people who gathered in front of Khalkhali's<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>. *Chafiyehs* are traditional Arab scarves that are often used as headdresses by many Arabs. They are generally called *kaffiyehs* outside of Iran. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/fashion/shows/11KAFFIYEH.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/fashion/shows/11KAFFIYEH.html?_r=0).

<sup>7</sup> Ayatollah Khalkhali was appointed an Islamic Revolutionary Judge by Ayatollah Khomeini following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. He sentenced many people to death in summary trials. For further information see *Haunted Memories: The Islamic Republic's Execution of Kurds in 1979*, available at <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/3508-haunted-memories-the-islamic-republics-executions-of-kurds-in-1979.html?p=13#.UWtmkbVQHps>

headquarters along with another 15 people, some of whom were our distant relatives. They were executed in public in the garden of the former district governor's office in Susangerd. My brother, who knew Persian well and was politically active, said to Mr. Khalkhali, "Mr. Khalkhali, give us a chance to defend ourselves." Khalkhali, who was speaking publicly, replied, "If you are innocent you are martyrs, and if you are guilty, you get the punishment you deserve." They did not have a trial. Some of these 17 people were called Iraqi prisoners [of war]. But they were not [from Iraq]. They were all from Susangerd/Khafajieh.

22. The charges leveled against them included waging war on God<sup>8</sup>, counter-revolutionary activity, and being part of the fifth column.<sup>9</sup> Only God knows how Mr. Khalkhali and his agents determined this. This happened at the beginning of the war, after maybe ten or twenty days had passed since the war.<sup>10</sup> I don't know exactly when the war began.<sup>11</sup> I was attending Danesh Middle School in Susangerd (Khafajieh) at the time, and the school closed when the war began. Everyone stayed home because Iraq attacked the city with mortars. The schools were closed. Those 17 individuals were executed 10 days after [the beginning of the war].
23. My father was not executed with those 17 people. They took him in another car when he was arrested. We don't know the exact date of my father's death, but based on what we have heard since, [we estimate that] he was executed in May 1981. We tried to obtain news about him from [his arrest in] October 1980 until May 1981, but we were unsuccessful. We found out that my father was executed somewhere between the village of Abu Homeizeh and Khafajieh.
24. Since our town is small and tribal, we all know each other. [Some townspeople] broke the news that my father was executed. Based on what we found, his execution occurred in April-May 1981. But we didn't find his grave. We found out through other people. It's possible that the person who informed us was in the armed forces. He was an Arab. He said that he hadn't seen my father's execution himself, but that he heard that my father had been executed. We didn't believe this, and until 1988 we kept hoping that my father was alive. But after some investigation, the [same] person who informed me of my father's death said that his source witnessed it with his own eyes. He was a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>12</sup>
25. My father's name was Aziz. His father's name was Issa. My father's surname was Sherhani. My uncle's name was Hamid Sherhani. The names of my brother and two cousins [who were also executed] were Musa Sherhani, Shebel Sherhani and Saleh Sherhani [respectively]. [Our family traces its roots to] two brothers named Sherhan and Ali. When they grew up and their families got larger they maintained their ties. They remained in one tribe, but [Ali's] family chose the name Saddami and [Sherhan's] chose the name Sherhani.<sup>13</sup> This is the whole story of our grandfather, which I should have mentioned earlier. Basically, Sherhani is a tribe.

<sup>8</sup> *Muharibih*, or waging war on God, is a charge brought against individuals accused of armed resistance against the Islamic Republic and carries the death penalty.

<sup>9</sup> The "fifth column" is an expression used to describe a group of people, such as spies, who act against a political entity or an army from within.

<sup>10</sup> See *Bist o yek fi'udal bih jorm hamkari ba 'Aragh E'dam Shodand* (Twenty-one feudal landlords were executed for the crime of cooperation with Iraq) in *Ruzshomar Defa' Moghaddas*, 3 October 1980, available at:

<http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/events/4/EventsList//مقدس.دفاع.روز.شمار.html?Page=&Lang=fa&EventsId=359&Action=EventsDetail>.

<sup>11</sup> The Iran-Iraq War began on September 22, 1980 when Iraqi troops invaded Iran. For further information see

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293527/Iran-Iraq-War>

<sup>12</sup> The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was formed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution to protect the newly formed government from internal and external threats. For further information see <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324>

<sup>13</sup> Successive governments in early twentieth century Iran required the adoption of surnames, which were previously less common in Iran. See, e.g.,

[http://web.archive.org/web/20060912101324/http://www2.hawaii.edu/~majid/draft\\_papers/secularization/secularization.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20060912101324/http://www2.hawaii.edu/~majid/draft_papers/secularization/secularization.html).

26. During that time [after the Revolution] whoever belonged to the Sherhani family was arrested. My cousin used to work in the Ministry of Justice. When Mr. Beheshti was the head of the judiciary, my cousin went to see him and said, “Mr. Beheshti, please remove your turban, shave your beard and say that you are a Sherhani. You will be arrested on the spot.” Mr. Beheshti helped us a lot by writing a letter. He also issued an order saying that only those guilty of a crime were to be arrested.
27. After a year of searching—and not as a result of any notification by the government—we found the graves of my brother, uncle and two of my cousins who were executed later. They were buried in Beheshtabad [Cemetery] in Ahwaz. A portion of Beheshtabad Cemetery is referred to as *Lanatabad* [the land of the damned]. People who were executed were buried there. Now Beheshtabad Mosque stands there. The mosque’s foundation lies exactly on the graves of my brother and uncle and my two cousins who were arrested and executed in 1981. Their graves were [only] marked by numbers.
28. At that time almost 25 members of my family were on death row, including [some of] my cousins, uncles and other relatives. Every Ahwazi Arab knows the Sherhani story, even those living in Europe.

### **Escaping Susangerd**

29. After the arrest of my family members, we were afraid of whoever had a gun or a *chafiyeh*. We were also afraid of the police. Some people told us that we shouldn’t stay there. We went to my ancestral village near Khafajieh/Susangerd, where my father lived. We saw that they had emptied the house and ransacked it. My mother and second brother, who was older than me but younger than my brother who was executed, ran away. We didn’t know where they had gone.
30. We didn’t know where to go because we couldn’t even stay at our father’s house. Our house was in a village named Soydani, where all of our tribal relatives lived. All of them had run away as well. Some of them went to Bostan, which in Arabic is called Basatin. They stayed there.
31. During the war, when Iraq invaded, the area was cut off from other parts of Khuzestan. Some Khuzestani, or Ahwazi Arabs stayed in Bostan. We were caught between two fronts.
32. It’s etched in my memory: my younger sister was the only one who stayed with me, and we escaped together. I had to protect her as I looked for shelter myself. After all of this time, we still haven’t forgotten that terrible scene.

### **Family Financial Troubles**

33. As long as I lived in Iran, they [the authorities] didn’t let us work. We had no jobs. And when attempting to enroll in a university, we had to take a series of entrance exams and then we were subjected to investigations.<sup>14</sup> At the time of the selection process, we were rejected by every university’s intelligence office.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Being hired for a governmental job in Iran requires passing the *gozinesh* process, which involves interviews and background checks to ensure that applicants’ political and religious views meet the criteria set by the government.

<sup>15</sup> Every university and government office in Iran has a *herasat* office. *Herasat* offices are affiliated with Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, and these offices monitor universities and government offices for subversive acts.

34. Although I completed my [mandatory] military service and served under the flag of the Islamic Republic, I still couldn't work. Nobody would give me a job. They forced me to do military service but they refused to give me a job.
35. I completed my military service training in Kermanshah and then they sent me back to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). I should explain that I was a soldier who served in the IRGC, but I was not officially a member. In Iran, when you introduce yourself to the military, they assign you and you have no choice. I don't think they put me in the IRGC on purpose. My guess is that it was an accident. At that time when we reported for duty, they sent our group to the southern health facility. I served after the war, from 1990 to 1992.
36. Unfortunately, the government labeled and always looked at [my family] as counter-revolutionaries, even though my brother participated in the Revolution and even donated blood to injured soldiers. My other brother, the second oldest, had also participated in the demonstrations. I had horrible experiences when I was a teenager. I suffered a lot. We were homeless because of the war and we lived with a large family in Sepidar district in Ahwaz.
37. The brother who was executed was married. His wife was pregnant, and later on she gave birth to twins. Another brother, who was arrested but who is still alive was also married and his wife was also pregnant. My mother was also with us. Although I was a child focused on playing games, I was the only man in the house and I was called "the man of the family." I didn't understand the meaning of being the man of the family. I was still in school, and my mother would prepare plastic products for me to sell. She put the plastic products under her *aba*<sup>16</sup> to hide them from my brothers' wives. She sent me to the Zandi intersection to sell them hoping that nobody would recognize me. After one week I collected the money and bought a bottle of milk for my brother's kids.

### Confiscation of Property

38. Our lives were very hard. They confiscated our lands on the charge that we were counter-revolutionaries. At that time we were not farming. When they arrested our relatives, they also seized our property. I think they took 600 hectares of my uncles' properties. I have nine paternal uncles. They are from different mothers but the same father. A part of the land was in the war zone and it wasn't accessible, and it was confiscated as well.
39. We were able to take back only eight hectares of our 22 hectares. These eight hectares were in the war zone. They didn't return the land during the war, but only in 1994, six years after the war. They didn't even want to give us back those eight acres, but we got it back through some connections.
40. As I mentioned, my brother was an employee of the Ministry of Health, and [whenever a government employee] is executed or dies, his heirs are entitled to his pension. But we were even deprived of the rights mentioned in the social security law.<sup>17</sup>
41. Our properties were not close to the Iran-Iraq border. Neither Iran nor Iraq had a base on it. It was just used for agriculture. They gave our seized lands to others, such as the Basijis.<sup>18</sup> We know

---

<sup>16</sup>*Abas* are loose sleeveless outer-garments woven from animal hair. See [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/325/aba](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/325/aba).

<sup>17</sup> Iran's Social Security Law was passed in 1975. For information on coverage and benefits see <https://www.socialsecurity.gov/policy/docs/progdesc/ssptw/2004-2005/asia/iran.html>

[the people who now occupy the seized property] as well. They were from our village. We wanted to solve the problem inside the tribe but they said that they would not return our lands because we were counter-revolutionaries. It was to their benefit not to give back our property. And the government supported them. They were issued a deed, and we could not follow up or do anything to take back our property.

### **Arrest for Participation in Protests**

42. I had another encounter with the security services. In 1985, I was in seventh grade and [I was about 16 or 17 years old.] There was a demonstration [in Ahvaz] against a speech by Mr. Rafsanjani.<sup>19</sup> In that speech, he referred to Arabs as “gypsies.” This was published in *Kayhan* as well.<sup>20</sup> All the students in my school and other schools attended the protests, and I followed suit. They arrested a large number of people during the protests. I was 16 or 17 years old. I was among those arrested.
43. When they arrested us, they took us to the District 5 IRGC base in Lashkarabad. They blindfolded us and put us on a bus. They took us to an undisclosed location, but later on we found out that the place was called “Golf.” They kept us blindfolded for three nights and we saw nothing the whole time. The base was located near Chaharshir district in Ahwaz. After three days they called me. They helped us get up. The guard who was holding us told me to bring my head down so that it would not hit the ceiling. I said, “You are standing, why should I bend?” I was beaten for saying this.
44. At 3 am on the third day they interrogated me while I was still blindfolded and handcuffed. This was my first interrogation after three days of detention. During the interrogation I said something, and I was slapped from behind. Suddenly my blindfold fell down. I recognized the face of my interrogator. He was our instructor in the military preparedness class at school. I said, “I know you, Mr. Bet Sayah.” I think his first name was Abdolreza, but I am not sure. We always called the teachers by their last names. He lived in the Malashieh neighborhood of Ahwaz. He said, “Close your eyes.” I got scared and closed my eyes. Then someone blindfolded me again and said, “Don’t look.” Later when the rest of them left, Mr. Bet Sayah said, “I wanted to help you. They were here and I didn’t want them to know anything.” I didn’t believe him because I spent three months in prison.
45. I was interrogated three times overall. In the second interrogation, [my interrogator] asked, “Did you protest to avenge the deaths of your father, uncle and brother?” I asked, what did that protest have to do with them?” He said, “No, you are lying.” I took my worst beating in that interrogation. But they beat us all the time. The worst time was when they injured the skin on my foot with their military boots. It was painful and it cut my skin. It was a very bad injury—I still have some black spots on my foot.
46. I was arrested in the protests with many others. There were five of us in a six square-meter room. It was not a cell; it was a room two meters wide and three meters long. There was no bed, it just

---

<sup>18</sup> Basij is a paramilitary volunteer militia established in 1979, and it is controlled by the IRGC.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is one of the most influential figures in Iranian politics. He was the speaker of the Iranian parliament from 1980 to 1989, and he was president from 1989 to 1997.

<sup>20</sup> *Kayhan* is a well-known Iranian newspaper that has been in circulation since 1943. In the 1980s, it was placed under the direct supervision of the office of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. See [http://www.iranchamber.com/media/articles/kayhan\\_newspaper.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/media/articles/kayhan_newspaper.php).



had a carpet. Two people shared one blanket. In the first three days we ate while blindfolded. They just untied our hands. The first three days were very hard.

47. When they wanted to beat us, they said, "Close your eyes and move forward." They blindfolded us and we were not allowed to look. Then they would call one of us and tell us to walk straight ahead. Once we did they beat us severely. Sometimes they just entered [our cells] and kicked us. We saw them, but I didn't recognize them. When they came at night, it was dark. They just came, harassed us, beat us, and left. One or two people would come and pick on us.
48. I was in prison for three months. In the first days I was in Golf but later they transferred me to another location; I don't know where that was. When I was released, they took me blindfolded to Sa'at Circle [in Ahwaz]. I got out of the car. Someone opened my blindfold and said, "Stand here and don't look around for five minutes." I was too scared to turn my head, and I didn't even dare to look back because if I did they would beat me.
49. I never went to court for this issue, nor was I ever arraigned. After my release I was not threatened, but I was followed. At least I always felt that I was being monitored. In fact, I was, because I realized that there was information in my file regarding three interviews I had for work or for my university classes. For example, they told me that I had participated in a poetry reading in Ahwaz. I said that I had not been there. In Ahwaz, in a celebration or a wedding ceremony the guests recite Arabic poetry. Reading poetry doesn't require a permit, and I was there. It is not considered a crime according to the laws of the Islamic Republic. But none of the charges they level against the people are actually crimes according to their own laws, whether it is their penal code, civil code or the Constitution. The crimes of waging war on God or spreading corruption on earth are not defined anywhere.<sup>21</sup> For instance, what constitutes waging war on God? Would it be enough if someone didn't like the revolution?
50. After my release, I kept quiet for six months. I was afraid of everything because they told us that they were aware of everything we said. So I didn't trust anyone.

### **Difficulties Finding Employment**

51. I was arrested in June 1985, and I was released in September, close to my exams. I received failing grades since I was not able to study due to being in prison. When I was released I returned to my exams. I was in prison for my June exams, and I received failing exams in the September make-up exams. I had to repeat that year because I was not prepared for my exams. So I repeated the seventh grade. Later I attempted to enter Iran's state-run national university system twice. I failed the written exam on my first try. But I passed the second time. However, they rejected me during the selection process. The Islamic Azad University system did not exist at that time.<sup>22</sup> Then I took an exam to work in a bank in 1992. I passed the written portion, but I was rejected during the interview and selection process.
52. I received my high school diploma after the Iran-Iraq War. It was in 1989 or 1990, when I was 21 or 22 years old. Since I wanted to continue my education I took the entrance exam of a newly-established university called Imam Hossein University. This university was run by the IRGC.

---

<sup>21</sup> Article 183 of the Iran's Islamic Penal Code states, "Any person who resorts to weapons to cause terror and fear or to breach public security and freedom shall be considered as a *mohareb* and corrupt on earth [*mofsed fel-arz*]."

<sup>22</sup> The Islamic Azad University was established in 1982 by the charter of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution. According to its website, the university has more than 400 branches and educational centers in Iran.

Since the number of applicants was low, they accepted everyone in the written portion and then they invited everyone for interviews.

53. When I went to the interview in the IRGC office in Chaharshir in Ahwaz, they put a file in front of me. I didn't know anything regarding the people about whom they questioned me. The interviewer said, "You have a very extensive file." I said jokingly, "I hope it's not a capital case." He indicated that he didn't know anything about the file. He laughed, but he said he had to do his job.
54. He was with the IRGC. He said, "I don't know anything about your file and you don't know me. But there is a file, and I have to question you about it." His questions included: "What is the relationship between Najj Sherhani and you?" "Why was your father executed?" "Why was your uncle executed?" "Why was your brother executed?" "Why did your sister do that?" His questions were irrelevant. I asked him to ask about myself. Even if my father was guilty, what did it have to do with me? But unfortunately, I was rejected for that very reason.
55. My third attempt to find a job was with the Iranian National Steel Industrial Group.<sup>23</sup> My field was accounting. There is an accounting internship that [an aspiring accountant] must complete after high school. You will receive your diploma only after you have finished this internship, and you have to find the internship yourself. My friend and I went to an interview because they were selecting some applicants for training. They had a practical interview to evaluate the applicant's ability for the job. My friend was a Persian from Dezful, and I was an Arab.
56. In high school my friend was not at my level in terms of grades or performance. When we worked at the steel plant I always did a better job than him. I also got into the training program through my connections. We were not being paid for the job, as it was part of our course requirements. He had connections as well.
57. I was rejected for the permanent position. I was accepted after the interview that we both had. But I was rejected during the selection process, and my friend was hired. Even my friend told me that he had not been able to answer the questions very well. He said, "I thought that they would hire you because I wasn't able to answer correctly."
58. I registered a formal complaint. I don't think my rejection was due to [ethnic] discrimination [rather it was due to my family's political history]. I had a meeting with Mr. Farzaneh, who ran the Group's financial office, and I said, "It's my right to work here. Why did you hire my friend? I need to work, because I have two sisters who are not married. I am the provider for my mother and the children and the wife of my brother who was executed. I need a job." He was a very respectable gentleman. He said, "Mr. Sherhani, it's not in my control. If it were up to me I would hire you."
59. Even if my father, brother and uncle had committed a crime, which they hadn't—and no trial proved anything against them—why should I be held responsible for their crime? It was a serious blow for me.

### **Taking Action to Address Inequality**

---

<sup>23</sup> Formed in the 1960s, the Iranian National Steel Industrial Group comprises a group of plants in a 250-hectare area located between Ahvaz and Khorramshahr.

60. I left Iran in May 2000. In Iran I was self-employed. For instance, I worked as a taxi driver. I was also in construction for a while. I used to work in that heat while going to school at the same time. But I was not able to obtain the job I wanted and for which I had studied. I was not given any opportunity. In the 1990s, the reformists came into power after the election of Mr. Khatami, and the Iranian nation was able to enjoy some freedoms.<sup>24</sup> During this period we [Ahwazi Arabs] enjoyed an easing of restrictions, and we participated in cultural events.
61. We should clarify the definition of political activity. For example, if someone points out that they are deprived... this is not a political action against the government. I was talking about inequality, and I supported [the dialogue that took place in the reform era]. Other things I did included: participating in a demonstration, reading leaflets, or taking part in cultural events. These are not crimes. Even their own law does not recognize these as crimes. But unfortunately things turned out differently.
62. Anyway, during Mr. Khatami's administration some restrictions were lifted. During that period we took the initiative and held a number of events. This had nothing to do with any political party or any other political issue. In our events we sought to revive Arabic poetry, stated our demands, and discussed the issues of the day or the protests going on at the time. We asked the parliamentary representatives of Ahwaz or Khuzestan province in general to address our issues. We were unemployed, and unemployment hurt us. Khuzestan houses the national oil company,<sup>25</sup> the Khuzestan Steel Company, and the Ahvaz Pipe Mills Company.<sup>26</sup> All companies related to Iran's natural resources are based in Khuzestan, and I, as a native of Khuzestan, should be able to earn a living working in these companies. Why should a non-native be able to come there and get a better job, earn a higher salary, and live a more comfortable life than me? These problems really hit home for the people of Khuzestan.

### **Life after Iran**

63. I still feel that I'm an Iranian citizen. But I'm going to tell you a story. There's a place in London for refugees. I spoke with an Iranian woman there. She asked, "Sir, do you see yourself as an Iranian or as an Arab?" This meant that I couldn't be both! I told her that I had a question of my own. I asked her to look me in the eye before answering. I asked, "Based on your question, do you accept an Arab as an Iranian?" She said, "Well, I had not heard about Arabs living in Iran." I said, "Well, madam, there are Arabs in Iran." We talked for a while. She was an open-minded person, but she swore that she had never heard about Arabs living in Iran. But her question was offensive. The Islamic Republic and previous Iranian governments never accepted us as Iranians.

---

<sup>24</sup> President Mohammad Khatami was elected in May 1997 as president. He was re-elected in 2001 and served as president until 2005. The period between 1997 and 2005 is commonly referred to as the reform era, during which political and social restrictions in Iran were moderately loosened.

<sup>05</sup> is commonly referred to as the reform era, during which political and social restrictions in Iran were moderately loosened.