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# Political History of Ahwaz: Iranian Occupation, Colonialism and Ahwazi People's Territorial Claims

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## Abstract

Ahwazi people in Iran identify with their own ethnicity, language and culture rather than the Iranian national identity. They rely on history to demonstrate their peoplehood, nationality and entitlement to the right to self-determination. While Ahwazi history is highly contested, this research aims to frame the discussion on the Ahwazi people's long-standing historical claims to territory by offering an Ahwazi perspective. This research delves into the historical dynamics between the Ahwazi Sheikhs and the Shah of Persia, assessing the extent of the Sheikhs' autonomy and the Shah's dominion over the Ahwaz region. It provides an overview of the geography, natural resources, ethnic composition, political history, and claims over the Ahwaz region. It also demonstrates how colonial interests led to the occupation of the last Ahwazi emirate and influenced the origin of the Iranian nation-state, encompassing a centralised political system with no room for diversity and inclusion.

**Keywords:** Ahwaz Political History, Iran, Military Occupation, Colonialism, Territorial Claims.

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İran Çalışmaları Dergisi bilginin yayılması ve zenginleşmesi için Açık Erişim Politikasına 291 uygundur.



## Ahvaz'ın Siyasi Tarihi: İran İşgali, Sömürgecilik ve Ahvaz Halkının Toprak İddiaları

Abdulrahman Hetteh\*

### Öz

İran'daki Ahvaz halkı, İran ulusal kimliğinden ziyade kendi etnik kökeni, dili ve kültürüyle özdeşleşmektedir. Halk olduklarını, milliyetlerini ve kendi kaderini tayin hakkına sahip olduklarını göstermek için tarihe güvenmektedirler. Ahvaz tarihi oldukça tartışmalı olsa da bu araştırma, Ahvaz perspektifi sunarak Ahvaz halkının uzun süredir devam eden tarihsel toprak iddialarına ilişkin tartışmayı çerçevelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu araştırma, Ahvaz Şeyhleri ile İran'daki Şah arasındaki tarihsel dinamikleri inceleyerek Şeyhlerin özerkliğinin kapsamını ve Şah'ın Ahvaz bölgesi üzerindeki hakimiyetini değerlendirmektedir. Ahvaz bölgesinin coğrafyası, doğal kaynakları, etnik yapısı, siyasi tarihi ve iddiaları hakkında genel bir bakış sağlamaktadır. Ayrıca sömürgeci çıkarların son Ahvaz Emirliği'nin işgaline nasıl yol açtığını ve çeşitliliğe ve katılıma yer vermeyen merkezi bir siyasi sistemi kapsayan İran ulus devletinin kökenini nasıl etkilediğini de sergilemiş olmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahvaz Siyasi Tarihi, İran, Askeri İşgal, Sömürgecilik, Toprak Talepleri.

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## **1. Introduction**

The Arabs of different tribes populated and ruled the Ahwaz region for centuries (Manie, 2008, p. 25). According to Carsten Niebuhr's diary (1792), Arabs had traditionally been the owners of all the east coasts of the Arabian Gulf 'from the mouths of Euphrates, nearly to those of the Indus' (p. 137). Historical accounts note that the 'Arabian colonies' occupied the Gulf coast during the sixth century BC (Manie, 2008, p. 25; Niebuhr, 1792, p. 137-138).

Jaber Jalil Manie (2008, p. 25) suggests that Arabs' migration to Ahwaz coincided with the arrival of Arabs in Iraq, potentially during events such as Aram's flood and the Marib Dam collapse in Yemen between 570 and 542 BC. Some Arab settlements in Ahwaz resulted from the war, such as when certain Arab tribes were brought from the Arab Peninsula after being conquered by Shapur II, the Sassanid King, and settled in cities such as Susa (officially known as Shush) and Tustar (officially known as Shushtar) around 325 AD (AlHilo, 1970, p. 7; Rashidian, 1954, p. 5). Others settled around Shatt al-Arab and Karun River during the Islamic Caliphate rule in 637 AD (Abidi, 1980, p. 13-14). These historical records collectively indicate the presence and influence of Arabs in the Ahwaz region over centuries, shaping its demographic and cultural landscape.

In addition to Ahwazi Arabs, ethnoreligious minorities, including Christians and Mandaeans, have been historically tied to Ahwaz for thousands of years (Chaab, 2017, p. 99). Many non-Arab Ahwazi ethnic communities of Syriac and Jewish origin adopted Islam throughout history. They were known as Dezfulis, Shushtaris, and Behbahanis, attributed to their inhabited cities. Some migrated from Eastern Rome due to religious persecution, and others were brought to Ahwaz by the Sassanian King as prisoners during the war with the Romans in 260 AD (Dialogue Institute for Research and Studies, 2022). These groups have used languages unrelated to Persian (Miller et al., 2014, p. 29). Dezfulis and Shushtaris do not see themselves as Persians but as heirs to ancient local empires and Greek immigrants. Similar to the treatment of the Ahwazi Arabs, Iranian literature does not consider those who identify with these distinct cultures and ethnicities as ethnic groups (Elling, 2013).

Another ethnoreligious minority in Ahwaz is the Mandaean community. They use their own written and spoken Aramaic language, follow John the Baptist, and have their holy book known as *Ginza* (Khamisi, 2015, p. 10-11, 14;). The Mandaeans are estimated to be over 100,000 worldwide, with 25,000 living in Ahwaz (Buckley, 2002; Tahvildar et al., 2001). Whether the Iranian authorities have any statistics about their population is still being determined. It is difficult to find exact numbers of Mandaeans in Ahwaz and worldwide for a variety of reasons. Mandaeans have conflicting views about including individuals who marry outside the religion, forced converts to Islam, and seculars as community members. Mandaeans face identity problems, and many of them identify with their heritage based on ethnicity and culture, giving less emphasis to religion (Buckley, 2002, p. 6).

Mandaean human rights issues in Iran are linked to the Ahwazi issues because some Mandaeans consider themselves part of the Arab community, which makes them subject to “dual persecution, for being Arab and for being Mandaean” (Al-Sheati, 2011). Thousands of Mandaeans emigrated from Ahwaz to Western countries due to the war between Iran and Iraq between 1980 and 1988 and religious persecution triggered by Iran’s Shia state (Al-Sheati, 2011; Buckley, 2002, p. 6).

In addition to ethnoreligious minorities, there are Persians and non-Arab migrants who settled in Ahwaz in the last century (Mehrabi et al., 2015, p. 149). The Bakhtiari Lurs are the leading non-Arab ethnic group inhabiting the Zagros Mountain range bordering Arabistan (Strakes, 2011, p. 347). These nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes gradually moved into and settled in the northern regions of Arabistan following the forced settlement and policy of demographic changes by the central government after 1925 (Poor Bakhtiar, 2008).

These demographic changes and continuous settlement of non-Arabs have subsequently taken place at the expense of the Ahwazi Arabs, who feel they are treated as second-class citizens and are racially, economically, and politically suppressed by the state (Moradi, 2014, p. 7, 16). Ahwazi activists claim that the non-Arab settlers are entrusted with the region’s administration and hold economic and political power in Ahwaz (Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, 2004). The Ahwazi Arabs complain about the lack of access to jobs in the government sector and oil and industrial

companies, predominantly run by non-Arabs (Aljazeera, 2007). It is necessary to acknowledge that due to the sensitivity of the topic, it is challenging to access official documentation that may explicitly talk about demographic engineering in Ahwaz and other ethnic-populated regions in Iran. However, analysing the existing statistics shows that such changes have occurred.<sup>1</sup>

From the Ahwazi people's perspective, Iran was an occupying state that used military force to end the last semi-independent Ahwazi Arab emirate in Arabistan (officially Khuzestan) in 1925. The political history of Ahwaz is a complex and contested topic. However, history plays a significant role in awakening and shaping the Ahwazi national identity and aspirations. This article provides an overview of Ahwaz geography, followed by ancient, Islamic and contemporary history of the region using an Ahwazi lens. It studies the establishment of Arab dynasties, kingdoms and emirates in the Ahwaz region and investigates the role of colonial powers, the Ottoman Empire and Iranian ambitions in the region that hindered the establishment of an independent Arab state in Ahwaz since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It concludes that the current Ahwazi people's aspirations for self-determination are rooted in the historical struggle to establish their own state free from Iran's intervention and exploitation.

## **2. Geo-Strategy and Importance of Ahwaz**

The Ahwaz region is located in the South and Southwest of Iran, on the east coast of the Arabian Gulf. It commences on the eastern side of the Shatt al-Arab River, which forms the Iraqi border. It ends on the western side of the Jagin River with the Bashagerd Mountains chain in the south, creating the natural frontier with Baluchistan province. To the east, Ahwaz is separated from the Iranian plateau by the natural barrier of the Zagros Mountains, and on the southern border lies the Arabian Gulf. Ahwaz comprises three provinces of Arabistan (officially known as Khuzestan), Bushehr, and Hormozgan, including more lands annexed to the adjacent provinces. Ahwaz's contemporary geographical region was recognised as a territorial unit in 2700 BC under the Elamite civilisation (Amer, 1981, p.

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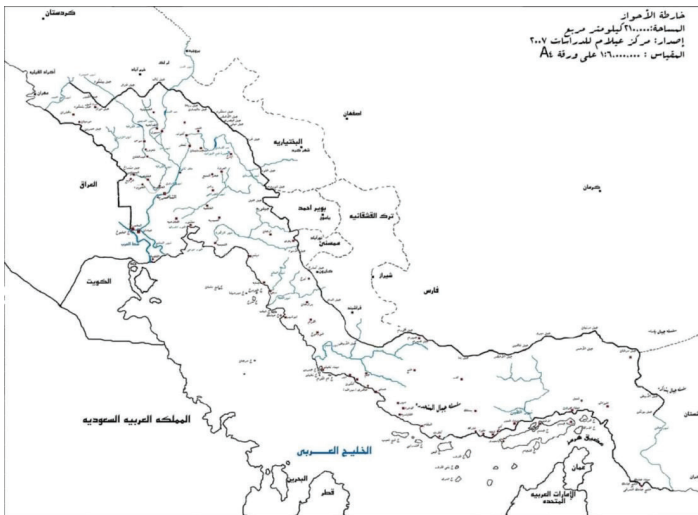
<sup>1</sup> For further reading about the statistics of non-local employees in Ahwaz's industrial sector, see (Nawaser, 2013).

165, 181). The Ahwazi authors claim that it covers an estimated 210,000 square kilometres (Haidari, 2007, p. 6-9; Hetteh, 2022).

Maps showing the geography of Ahwaz and Iran's ethnoreligious distribution.

## Map 1

### Ahwaz Location



*Note.* The map of Ahwaz includes three provinces of Arabistan (Khuzestan), Bushehr and Hormozgan. Translations of the text on top of the map: Map of Ahwaz: An area of 210,000 square kilometres; Publisher: Ilam Studies Center; Map scale of 1:6,000,000 in A4 paper. The map shows the location of Ahwaz surrounded from the Iranian side by the lands of Lurs, Qashqai Turks, Fars province and Baluchistan in the north and east of Ahwaz; Iraq from the west; and the Arabian Gulf from the south. Ahwazi political groups and writers created the map. The map was extracted from the book by an Ahwazi author:

Haidari, G. (2007). *Al-Ahwaz bieuyun Ahwaziyah*. Elam Studies Centre. p. 6-9.

## Map 2

### *Iran's Ethnoreligious Distribution*



*Note.* This map does not include Bushehr as an Arab-populated region, nor does it emphasise the existing Sunni population in the three provinces of Arabistan, Bushehr and Hormozgan, which reduces the accuracy of its information. Nonetheless, it shows that Arabistan and Hormozgan and parts of Shiraz, Kerman, Semnan, and Khorasan provinces in Iran are populated by Arabs. Adopted from

Pars Times. (n.d.). People of Iran. <http://www.parstimes.com/people/>

Ahwaz is considered a natural extension of the plains of Mesopotamia, forming part of a homogeneous Arab world since the 7th century in terms of geography, economy, and human existence. Being located at the entrance of the Arab and non-Arab worlds and with its strategic and trading location on the northern and eastern coasts of the Arabian Gulf and its rich natural resources, Ahwaz has played a crucial role in commerce and maritime navigation since the 19th century (Abidi, 1980, p. 8-9). Ahwaz has been significant for its strategic military location as part of the land bridge that links Asia, Europe, and Africa. It sits on the head of the Arabian

Gulf, which connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean (Najjar, 1971, p. 30).

Mustafa Abdelkader Najjar argues that the strategic position of Ahwaz became vital to colonial powers in the past due to its adjacency to Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait and its economic importance, being rich in oil and having fertile land and water (Najjar, 1971, pp. 30-31). The fact that the Ahwaz is rich in natural resources while the Ahwazi people are suffering from poverty, underdevelopment, and confiscation of their land has also given rise to the demands of the Ahwazis for self-determination. Economic disparity imposed by Iran violates the resource dimension of self-determination rights of the Ahwazi people under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966, Article 1(2)) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966, Article 1(2)).

### **3. The Ancient History of Ahwaz**

Ahwaz was a political entity or a sub-entity since the establishment of the Elamite civilisation in the region in 2700 BC (Amer, 1981, p. 181). Throughout history, the current Ahwaz region or parts thereof were called Elamite, Susa, Ahwaz, Khuzestan, Hormuz, and Arabistan (Strakes, 2011, p. 339-341). The history of different dynasties illustrates that conquest was the predominant method of acquisition of title over Ahwaz by the empires. Ahwaz went through many political phases, ruled by its people and, at other times, subjected to conquest by Assyrians, Persians, Parthians, Greeks, and Turks. The Elamite was the first ancient civilisation in Ahwaz, followed by the Assyrian rule in 639 BC (Amer, 1981, p. 178), and the Achaemenid dynasty, the first Persian Empire in 539 BC (Khalafi, 2016, p. 24-37). Subsequently, Ahwaz was ruled by various dynasties, such as the Seleucid Empire, the Parthian Empire, and the Persian Sassanid (Amer, 1981, p. 178; Khalafi, 2016, p. 24-37). The Maysan Kingdom (129 BC-224 AD) - the first semi-autonomous and sometimes independent Arab Satrap (or province) of the Parthian Empire - ruled southern Iraq and ancient Elamite for three centuries (Khalafi, 2016, p. 24-37).



#### **4. Ahwaz under Islamic Caliphates**

In 637/640 AD, the Mesopotamian Arabs, with the support of the local Arabs, defeated the Sassanid Persians and established a provincial capital known as Suq al-Ahwaz (Amer, 1981, p. 178; Strakes, 2011, p. 340 ). During that time, Ahwaz was administered by the *Wali* (Governor) of the wilayat of Basra (Abidi, 1980, p. 20-21). The *wilayat* was an administrative division known as the 'governorate' under the Caliphate. The legal status of Ahwaz did not change during the subsequent Rashidun, Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, except it became a *wilayat* itself, similar to other Islamic governorates such as Hejaz, Fars, Khorasan, Egypt, along with others, under the Abbasid Caliphate (Abidi, 1980, p. 20-21; AlHilo, 1969, p. 77-78). However, due to the decline of the Abbasid, these governorates were divided between several *Amirs* (military commanders) (Najafabadi et al., 2018, p. 97-100). As a result, the commanders of the Buwayhid dynasty (932-1063) extended their military control over south Persia, Ahwaz and Baghdad and placed the Abbasid Caliphs under their guardianship (Bosworth, 2013, p. 203-206).

#### **5. The Establishment of the Arab Kingdom and Emirates on the Eastern Side of the Arabian Gulf**

As mentioned in section one, south Persia, including the eastern shore of the Arabian Gulf and islands, is considered by contemporary Ahwazi Arab groups to be part of Ahwaz territory because Arabs have inhabited these regions for millennia.

Due to the decline of the Islamic Caliphate in the early 900s, the administration of different parts of Ahwaz changed under new local rulers. After the fall of the Buwayhid dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Arab Kingdom of Hormuz was established on the Arabian Gulf's eastern shore (currently known as Bandar Abbas) and Oman coasts. Hormuz gained independence after the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 13<sup>th</sup> century due to internal conflicts between various dynasties in Persia. The Kerman rulers in south Persia had hostile relations with Hormuz as they sought tribute and payment (Khuri & Tadmori, 1999, p. 20, 339). Hormuz was mentioned in the writings of the famous Italian explorer Marco Polo as a noble and immense trade city on the sea (Polo et al., 1993, Chapter

19). With the arrival of the Portuguese in the Arabian Gulf in the early sixteenth century, Hormuz lost its independence and became a Portuguese protectorate. While the Portuguese subjugated Hormuz through military force, they did not consider it *terra nullius* (nobody's land). Instead, they recognised the Hormuz population as socially and politically organised people with a system of government represented by the local King. The Portuguese effectively treated it as a protectorate, and the subjugation took place through what could be called unfair treaties with the Hormuz King. The first treaty with the Hormuz King was signed in 1507 and was designed to restore the Hormuz King's local authority. In return, he became a vassal of Portugal's King, paid an annual tribute, and handed over lands for the section of a Portuguese fortress and a factory (Awad, 1985, p. 123; Buderer & Ricart, 2018, p. 265). After a local revolt in 1523, a second treaty was signed, imposing a duty on the Hormuz King to provide houses for Portuguese traders. In exchange, the local ships were permitted to sail freely in the sea on the condition that they would not carry arms on board, and the arsenal belonging to the Hormuz King was kept in Portuguese castles (Awad, 1985, p. 116-117, 123; Wilson, 1928, p. 116-117, 123). This treaty brought Hormuz under the Portuguese's direct control for over a century until the Safavids, with the aid of the British and Dutch navy, seized the region, destroyed Hormuz city and committed atrocities against the local population in 1622 (Awad, 1985, p. 123; Salman, 2004, p. 233; Wilson, 1928, p. 116-117, 123, 148-51). The Safavids were the first Turkish dynasty to expand its control and rule the land historically known as Persia for the first time since the collapse of the Sassanid Persians in 637 AD.

With the collapse of the Safavids in 1737, wars intensified between various ruling dynasties in Persia. Meanwhile, several independent Arab emirates were established in southern Persia along the east-coast of the Arabian Gulf (Awad, 1985, p. 131; D'souza, 2002, p. 19-20; Sweet, 1964, p. 266-267). Arabs live across the entire Arabian Gulf, spanning contemporary Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Carsten Niebuhr (1792, p. 137-138) wrote in his visit to the region that all the east coasts of the Arabian Gulf belonged to the Arabs, stating that the European geographers were wrong 'in representing a part

of Arabia as subject to the Monarchs of Persia'.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr (1792, p. 137, 140) noted that the Arabs in southern Persia used and exhibited the same language and manners as the native inhabitants of Arabia. They were independent and in constant war with the Kings of Persia. These emirates controlled the seashore of the Arabian Gulf as they negotiated with foreign powers, including the British Empire, to whom they gave permission to establish factories and conduct exclusive trade in Bushehr port in 1763 (Niebuhr, 1792, p. 145; Wilson, 1928, p. 178). Other emirates, such as Al Zuabi in Bandar Rig, entered wars with the King of Persia and colonial powers and seized Kharg Island in the Arabian Gulf from the Dutch navy (Niebuhr, 1792, p. 146-148; Wilson, 1928, p. 180-182). Most Arab emirates, including Qawasim, Abbasien, Abadelah, Al Mansour, Al Ali, Al Marazeeq, and others, were small and not united. Persia's military force gradually occupied them before 1923 (Mosalmah, 2008, p. 49).<sup>3</sup>

## **6. The Arab Rule of Moshashaies over Northern Ahwaz (Arabistan) Since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century**

Persia's southwest or the northern part of Ahwaz was also known as Arabistan from the rise of the Safavid dynasty in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 1925 – currently known as Khuzestan. After the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Arabistan witnessed constant wars between various rivals, mainly Turkic dynasties.<sup>4</sup> In 1441, the local Arabs revolted against the Timurid dynasty and established the first independent Arab Kingdom of Mushasha or Moshashaies (Azawi, 2004, p. 272; Newman, 2003, p. 267-269; Ranjbar, 2004, p. 135-139; Zubeidi, 1982, p. 5-6). King Mohsen (1436-1508) expanded the Moshashaies by acquiring Basra in Iraq, Al-Ahsa and Al-Qatif in Arabia, Kermanshah in Persia, and Bushehr

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<sup>2</sup> It should be acknowledged that Niebuhr referred to the Gulf as the Persian Gulf. However, the Gulf has also been referred to as Arabian Gulf, a chosen terminology used in this article. For further information about the use of the Arabian Gulf and the Persian Gulf name throughout history, see (Al Ghaithi, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> For further reading about the last Arab emirates of the east coast of the Arabian Gulf, see (Wahidi, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the emergence of the term 'Arabistan' and its geographical area, see (Soucek, 1984, p. 203-208).

and islands in the Arabian Gulf, as seen in map 3 below. He established an independent territory, minted coinage as a currency and built several military fortresses across the Kingdom.

Map showing the Moshashaies Kingdom on the northern side of the Arabian Gulf in 1444.

### Map 3

#### *Moshashaies Kingdom or Mushasha*



*Note.* Visual Capitalist. (n.d.). Map of Europe and nearby in 1444 AD. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/medieval-map-of-europe-in-1444.html><sup>5</sup>

The era of Moshashaies' absolute independence - for almost 70 years - ended due to the rivalries and constant wars between the Turkic dynasties of Sunni Ottomans and Shia Safavids in Persia who sought to rule Arabistan and Baghdad. In 1508, the Safavid Shah Ismail occupied the Moshashaies

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5 For further reading about Moshashaies territory, see (Ranjbar, 1984, p. 177, 305-306; Zubeidi, 1982, p. 14-16).

Kingdom by military force, yet he recognised the Moshashaies as the local rulers (Zubeidi, 1982, p. 13, 16-18).

Religion was the justification for the occupation of the Moshashaies Kingdom by the Safavids because the Isma'ili variant of Shi'ism was the basis of the Moshashaies belief system, which the Safavid Shah considered a challenge to the official Twelver Shi'ism system propagated throughout his territory (Newman, 2003, p. 269). The Safavids used indirect control over multiple semi-independent regions, including Arabistan in Persia. The local Kings or rulers of the four *wilayat* (governorates), including Arabistan, Georgia, Kurdistan and Lorestan, became known as *Wali*, who enjoyed greater freedom than Persia's other administrative and political divisions. Arabistan was given special status because it was an independent territory before the rise of the Safavids. The sub-regions and districts in Arabistan were ruled by the Sheikhs of prominent tribes who were also subject to the semi-independent *Wali* rule of Arabistan since the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Shebli & al-Asimi, 2014, p. 19).

While nominally, Arabistan's *Wali* was a subject of the Safavid state, he controlled the administrative apparatus and managed Arabistan's budget, internal security, and external relations with other protectorates. Without a specific tax system or government representative, the *Wali* paid only royalties, such as antiques, to the Safavid Shah during the Persian New Year. The *Wali* was virtually independent due to the region's remoteness, natural barriers and harsh climate conditions, which limited the direct intervention of the central government. Also, language and cultural barriers, including the way of life, made it extremely difficult and costly for the central government to impose direct control over the local Arabs (Newman, 2003, p. 267-272; Ranjbar, 2004, p. 301-304). The geopolitical situation of Arabistan allowed the Moshashaies to form alliances with regional powers such as the Portuguese. The Moshashaies also occasionally declared themselves independent during the war between the Safavids and the Ottomans (Dawood, 1960, p. 15; Della Valle, 1665, p. 248; Newman, 2003, p. 270-271; Schofield, 1989, p. 296; Teixeira & Stevens, 1802, p. 26-27; Zubeidi, 1982, p. 20-25).

## **7. Arabistan as a Buffer Zone in Treaties between Persia and the Ottoman Empire**

Due to its geopolitical importance, Arabistan served as a buffer between the Ottomans and the Safavids. It was similar to Georgia, Kurdistan and Lorestan, situated between the two neighbouring empires and enjoying semi-autonomous rule in their respective regions (Matthee, 2006, p. 55). According to the 1639 Zuhab treaty between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, the frontline between the Ottomans and the Safavids was an extensive zone starting from Armenia in the north and passing through Kurdistan, Lorestan and Arabistan to the Arabian Gulf (Cusimano, 1992, p. 92; Kia, 2017, p. 131; Lorimer, 1998, Chapters 10-11; O'Ballance, 1988, p. 2; Potter, 2004, p. 63; Williamson, 2008, p. 88). Multiple versions of that 1639 treaty have taken almost four centuries to define and internationally recognise the border long after the first treaty (Ates, 2019, p. 397-423).

Historical documents suggest that Arabistan enjoyed greater autonomy when the neighbouring empires constantly competed for control over it, with its tribes seeking patronage from them. In the 1639 Zuhab Treaty, Arabistan was in the border zone, stretching from Basra of Iraq to Fars of Persia (Schofield, 1989, p. 267; Zubeidi, 1982, p. 62). Williamson notes that “[i]solated from distant capitals and inhabited by hostile Arab ... tribes jockeying for patronage from the rival empires, these border areas were extremely unsettled” (Williamson, 2008, p. 88). Given the wars and the changing ruling dynasties in Persia, the borders with the Ottomans were constantly shifting. For example, Ottoman sovereignty over Arabistan was recognised in the 1727 Treaty of Hamadan between the Ottomans and the Afghan Ashraf Hotaki, who overthrew the Safavids (Avery et al., 1991, p. 300-301; Dhabet, 1966, p. 29, 62; Sadawi, 2001, p. 113; Shaw & Demy, 2017, p. 629). Nonetheless, the Kerden (Kurdan) Treaty between Afsharid Persia and the Ottomans in 1746 reaffirmed the provisions of the 1639 Zuhab Treaty (Avery et al., 1991, p. 309).

## **8. The Rise of Kaabs Emirate in Arabistan**

Simultaneously, with the disintegration of Persia following the Safavids' collapse, the Kaabs tribes in Falahiyah (Shadegan in Persian) in southwest Arabistan formed a political entity known as the Kaabs Emirate and

played a prominent political and military role in the Arabian Gulf history (Newman, 2003, p. 272; Noras & Raof, 1982, p. 28-30; Sadawi, 2001, p. 33). The Sheikh of Kaabs built a large navy between 1757 and 1760, refused an alliance with and did not pay tribute or respect to the Ottomans and Persians (Longrigg, 1925, p. 171; Noras & Raof, 1982, p. 30). The Kaabs tribes gained independence from Basra during the Persian Karim Khan's reign in the 1760s (Schofield, 1989, p. 125). The Kaabs became the master of the sea and Shatt al-Arab, and imposed tax on ships and businesses settled in the region for over a decade (Longrigg, 1925, p. 175; Malcolm, 1815, p. 76; Niebuhr, 1792, p. 149-51; Qasimi, 1999, p. 108; Sadawi, 2001, p. 42-43). As a result, the British East India Company (BEIC) – the largest corporation in the world with its private military - resorted to striking a naval blockade on Kaabs for two years, from 1766 to 1768 (Erikson, 2014; Noras & Raof, 1982, p. 45; Roy, 2016; Wilson, 1928, p. 186-187). Although Persia was part of the military campaign against the Kaabs, it regarded the Kaabs as a subject of Persia, requesting the withdrawal of the Ottoman and British forces from the Kaabs' territory, which they did (Layard, 1846, p. 55; Longrigg, 1925, pp. 173-175). Muhammarah, the central city and port of Kaabs, later became the capital of the Emirate of Kaabs. It is also referred to as the Emirate of Muhammarah and the Emirate of Arabistan in some texts. Since then, the Kaabs have used the Persian flag because of their Shia religious belief shared with Persia and not an acknowledgement of subjection to Persia (Schofield, 1989, p. 125). Persia had not exercised absolute control over Muhammarah, and Kaabs had never furnished troops nor paid revenue to Persia (Schofield, 1989, p. 125).

## **9. Colonial Powers and the Erzurum Treaty of May 1847 between Persia and the Ottoman Empire**

The border dispute continued to be a source of wars between Persia and the Ottoman Empire, resulting in the Erzurum Treaty of May 1847, led by the British and Russians, who sought to internationalise Shatt al-Arab and gain broad concessions in Persia, respectively (Noras, 1982, p. 8-9; Schofield, 2008, p. 410). The documents leading to the Erzurum Treaty indicate that Persia had never exercised absolute control over Muhammarah, and the Kaabs had never furnished troops or paid revenue to Persia. While the transmitted documents during the border negotiations

related to Muhammarah did ‘not contain decisive proofs of the territorial rights of either Persia or Turkey,’ the British Minister at Tehran stated that the evidence established indirect evidence in favour of Persia (Schofield 1989, p. 104-128, 259). Persia and the Ottoman Empire did not recognise Kaabs’ independence in the late 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as they were at war and claiming the contested lands. Under the British and Russian auspices, the 1847 treaty recognised Persia’s jurisdiction in the region despite Persia’s lack of effective control over the area and the absence of Kaabs’ recognition of Persian authority over them.

Schofield notes that with the 1847 Erzurum Treaty, the “Ottoman/Persian territorial divide began to crystallize in the delta region, impinging increasingly upon the effective autonomy of the regional power-broker, the [Sheikh of Muhammarah]” (Schofield, 2004, p. 31). The Erzurum Treaty embodies the first European model of territorial sovereignty in the Middle East. It granted Persia exclusive sovereignty over Muhammarah, Khizr Island (Abadan) and the east bank of Shatt al-Arab, which had not been the case before, at the expense of the local Sheikhs. It did not consider the Arabs’ entitlement to independence from Persia or the Ottoman Empire when both states could not provide decisive proof of territorial sovereignty over the region (Lesaffer, n.d.; Treaty of Erzurum between Persia and Ottoman Empire in 1847, Article 2; Memorandum respecting the frontier between Mohammerah and Turkey, n.d., p. 37v [74/82]). This treaty reflected London’s and Saint Petersburg’s economic and imperial interests in the region through their actions in mediating, collecting evidence, and drafting the final text. The Erzurum Treaty echoed “their need to create a clear legal context for the agreements they had or desired with the Ottoman and Persian empires about their imperial and colonial rights” (Lesaffer, n.d.). Due to the difficulty of protecting Arabistan from domestic revolts and foreign invasions, Persia’s Shah recognised Arabistan as an autonomous territory by a royal decree in 1857 (Khazal, 1962, p. 100). Arabistan had not surrendered to Persia after the 1847 Erzurum Treaty, and Persia was satisfied with Arabistan’s symbolic loyalty (Najjar, 1971, p. 64).



## **10. The Rise of Sheikh Khazal and Demands for Arabistan's Independence**

In light of Shah's recognition of Arabistan's autonomy, the British established a special relationship with the Sheikh of Muhammarah (Sheikh Khazal) (1897-1925) to protect their economic and political interests in Arabistan, including exclusive navigation in the Karun River in the face of the Russian commercial competition and influence in Persia (Khazal, 1962, p. 100; Noras, 1982, p. 9; Strunk, 1977, p. 4-8). With British support, Sheikh Khazal became an influential and *de facto* ruler of Arabistan by maintaining order among the Arab tribes. He protected the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's pipeline and infrastructures, granted the British concessions for irrigation projects, offered consulates and postal and telegraph offices, and leased land to build a railway in his territory (Strunk, 1977, pp. 158-179; Sarkar, 1919, p. 342; File 26/94, n.d., p. [3v] (17/292); Persia: Affairs of Arabistan, n.d., p. [2r] (3/6); File 2902/1916, n.d., p. [58r] (126/448); File 240/1913, n.d., pp. [12r] (28/452), [221r] (446/452), [192r] (388/452). Sheikh Khazal used the British influence over the Shah to prevent the Persian syndicates or subjects from controlling the development projects in Arabistan (File 2902/1916, n.d., pp. [46v] (103/448), [47r] (104/448), [49r] (108/448). He also settled the territorial dispute with the neighbouring Bakhtiari Lur tribes. He created an alliance with leaders of Qashqai and Pusht-i-Kuh (Lorestan) in Persia (Lauterpacht, 1991, p. 37; Wilson A. T., n.d., pp. [63r] (130/143), [63v] (131/143), and established a coalition with the Sheikhs in Kuwait, Arabia and Basra against the Ottomans before WWI (Lauterpacht, 1991, p. 37). In principle, Sheikh Khaz'al was the *de facto* ruler, which implied a degree of autonomy over administrative affairs and local matters with some control but not full sovereignty over natural resources.

Having established himself as the region's ruler in 1899, Sheikh Khazal requested British protection and recognition of Arabistan's independence from Persia under his leadership, but the British declined (File 2902/1916, n.d., p. [38r] (86/448); Strunk, 1977, p. 33). The British pledged several times that they would protect Khazal's jurisdiction and the Arabs in Arabistan from the Ottoman Empire and the Persian royalist and nationalist governments (File 2902/1916, n.d., pp. [38v] (87/448), [43r] (96/448). In 1914, the British agreed to protect Khazal's local autonomy and his

successors in case of any encroachment by the Persian Government on his jurisdiction and rights in Arabistan (File 2902/1916, n.d., p. [45r] (100/448)). The Home Office stated that recognising Khazal's autonomy placed significant political responsibility on the British government and made the 'undertaking to support the Sheikh established rights vis-à-vis the Persian Government more definite' and impose a moral obligation upon the British government to interfere in case Tehran violated the Sheikh's rights (File 2902/1916, n.d., p. [20v] (51/448)). These developments supported Ahwazis' claims to the territory because Arabistan was somewhat not under the control of Persia.

## **11. Shift in British Policy towards Persia and the Fall of the Last Ahwazi Emirate**

Persia's political integrity was impaired before WWI, and Persian politicians could not establish order or form a simple government (Olson, 2013, p. 17-18). Although the Shah granted concessions to the British government, Persia lacked effective control over several regions, including Arabistan and the adjacent territories of Lorestan, Bakhtiari and Qashqai in the south (File 2902/1916, n.d., p. [16v] (43/448)). There was no evidence that the Arabs attempted to prevent the British economic concessions granted by the Shah in Arabistan, except during the rule of Sheikh Miz'il from 1889 to 1897 (Strunk, 1977, p. 6). The Russians and British disregarded Persia's territorial integrity and independence when they divided it into zones of influence in the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907 to protect their economic interests and curb the impending German threat (AJIL, 1907, p. 400-402; Greaves, 1968, p. 71-72; Northedge & Wells, 1982, p. 140; Olson, 2013, p. 17, 19; Sarkar, 1919, p. 342-343). Subsequently, the British started *de facto* rule in southern Persia in 1916 (Olson, 2013, p. 20).

Due to Persia's lack of political stability, the British began a discussion on the dismemberment of Persia before WWI because their interests were at risk without their direct intervention (Olson, 2013, p. 17). The British were also concerned about Russian penetration in their sphere and the growing German threat in the neighbouring Ottoman Empire (Olson, 2013, p. 17-18). In a private letter in May 1914, the British Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office wrote about the lack of hope for Persia resuscitating

herself, facing the alternative of partitioning, 'or placing every branch of her administration under European control and supervision' (Olson, 2013, p. 17).

Following the start of WWI, Persia became a fighting front for the Central Powers, represented by the Ottoman Empire and the Allies, represented by Russia and Great Britain (Bullard, 1963, p. 6-20). The Ottomans and Germans succeeded in encouraging some Arabs to fight against the British forces and disrupted oil circulation in Arabistan (Aksakal, 2011, p. 184-99; Atabaki, 2016, p. 10; Burke, 2016, p. 7-16; RamHormozi, 2016; Zürcher, 2016). In addition, by the end of 1915, the Persian nationalists started an anti-British movement supporting the Germans (Atabaki, 2006, p. 1-3). In light of Persia's open hostility against the British in the south, a declaration of war by Persia was anticipated (Avery, 1965, p. 193-195; Barker, 1967, p. 134-43). It led to the British consideration of recognising Sheikh Khazal's independence and outlining the necessary procedure for such an event (File 2902/1916, n.d., p. [18r] (46/448)). As a result, Sir Percy Cox (1915), the Expediency Force's Chief Political Officer, recommended that before announcing the Khazal's independence, the British government should give Khazal secret assurances reaffirming the guarantee given to him and his successors and cancelling the condition requiring him to observe loyal attitude towards Persian Government, and informing him instead that in future, assuming a favourable termination of the war, while preserving his local autonomy as in the case of [Kuwait], we will withdraw him from suzerainty of Persian Government and protect him from aggression from that Government also, to the utmost of our power (Telegram No. 273R).

Cox's proposal aimed to declare Arabistan's independence from Persia and reassure British control over Arabistan's foreign affairs while preserving the existing local autonomy of Sheikh Khazal (Cox, 1915, Telegram No. 273R). The British instituted a similar situation in Kuwait, an autonomous vassal of the Ottoman Empire between 1871 and 1899 and a British protectorate from 1899 to 1961 (Metz, 1993, p. 73-79). Cox's proposal gained approval from prominent British officials, including Hardinge, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India; Hirtzel, the Political Secretary of the Indian Office; Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for India; Sir Edward Grey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Due to the possibility that the public announcement of the negotiation with Khazal could strengthen

the Persian war campaign against the British, the convenient time for the expected negotiation with Khazal was left to be decided by Marling, the British Minister at Tehran, who was against Arabistan's declaration of independence (Hardinge, 1915; Hirtzel, 1915; Grey, 1915). Cox's proposal envisaged that by granting independence to the Sheikh, a more favourable position would be created for the British government in the post-war period regarding the distribution of interests and resources with the other great powers in Arabistan. Cox proposed that Great Britain would gain further advantages by controlling Arabistan's foreign relations, the post, telegraphs and customs, adding that the British position as a protector of Arabistan would not be contested by other Powers (Cox, 1915, Telegram No. 368R). Sir Percy Cox (1915) stated further that the advantages

are that we thereby regulate the [Sheikh's] Position, and put him out of suspense at once, in a manner to which the allies cannot reasonably take exception, and which while sufficiently securing our interest in future will avoid inconvenience of including Arabistan among the items to be discussed and distributed among Allies after war (Telegram No. 368R).

After the defeat of the pro-German forces and the occupation of Tehran in November 1915 by the Russian military, Persia was surrounded. The British created South Persia Rifles consisting of Arabs, Persians and Baluchi in 1916 and maintained their direct control over South Persia (Fromkin, 1989, p. 209; Ward, 2009, p. 18-19). The British proposal for Arabistan's declaration of independence was never made public as the crisis with Persia ended without actual war (Strunk, 1977, p. 308-316). The other significant development in the region after WWI was when the British dissolved their relationship with Sheikh Khazal. The British were looking for an individual to protect their interest throughout Persia as the new Soviet government, following the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, unilaterally cancelled the tsarist concessions and left Britain the sole Great Power in Persia (Etheredge, 2011, p. 130). In 1921, Persia's *Majlis* (Parliament) rejected the 'British offer of military and financial aid that would effectively have made [Persia] into a protectorate of Britain' (Etheredge, 2011, p. 130). The British decided to cultivate stronger ties with Reza Khan, an officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade, deemed capable of protecting the British interests and an opponent of the Bolsheviks (Cohoon, 2017, p. 46; Waterfield, 1973; File 3/8, n.d., p. [177v] (354/508)). The British offered financial support to Reza Khan in the coup d'état in

Tehran on 20-21 February 1921, which changed the political structure of Persia and diminished the regional autonomies enjoyed by non-Persians, including the Arabs of Ahwaz (Etheredge, 2011, p. 130-131; Zirinsky, 1992, p. 644-645).

Although at the beginning of his rule in 1921, Reza Khan had promised not to invade Arabistan, the Persian troops intervened in Arabistan's domestic affairs, which led to threats of rebellion by Sheikh Khazal (File 3/8, n.d., p. [178v] (356/508), [179v] (358/508), [181r] (361/508)). The British dissuaded Sheikh Khazal from rebellion and actively facilitated his arrest by Persian troops, sending him to exile to Tehran in April 1925, marking the beginning of the *de facto* Persian military rule in Arabistan (Curtis & Hooglund, 2008, p. 27-28; Waterfield, 1973).

## **12. Conclusion**

This brief historical account of the power dynamics in parts of the territory now referred to as Ahwaz reveals the complexity of the relationship between Persia and the Arab emirates arising from the fact that Persia could not impose direct control over them. The Arabs enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy until 1925 and, during some periods of history from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, ruled independently in their coastal cities and regions. It was the case in the Hormuz Kingdom in southern Ahwaz and the Moshashaies Kingdom in the northern part of Ahwaz until the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Portuguese colonised Hormuz and the Safavids conquered the Moshashaies. Subsequently, the Safavids, with the help of the British and the Dutch navy, defeated the Portuguese, controlled Hormuz in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and united Persia for the first time since the Arab Muslim conquest of the Sassanid Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> AD. From the perspective of the Ahwazi people, Persia had never exercised effective control over the northern and southern parts of the Ahwaz territory. Instead, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ahwazis point to evidence of the Arabs taking control over their territory and establishing their emirates on the eastern shore of the Gulf, including the Kaabs in the Emirate of Arabistan in northern Ahwaz, which denied Persia effective rule in the region until the 1925 military occupation. This historical overview points to the fact that the Ahwazi people's legal status and rights in Iran should be determined in line with their historical grievances and struggles for self-determination.

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