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Iran's Khuzestan Province

A Research Paper

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Iran's Khuzestan Province (U)

A Research Paper

*Research for this report was completed
on 25 January 1980.*

This paper was prepared by analysts in Geography Division, Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research. It was coordinated with the Iran Task Force and the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Middle East-Africa-Western Hemisphere Branch,

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GC 80-10008

February 1980

Iran's Khuzestan Province (U)

Overview

The province of Khuzestan, located in the southwest corner of Iran, is economically and strategically the most important region in the country. (U)

Khuzestan produces almost 70 percent of Iran's crude oil and nearly all of its increasingly important natural gas. Khuzestan's four ports at the head of the Persian Gulf process the bulk of Iran's imports and exports. And the province contains one of Iran's few major expanses of underdeveloped arable land; with modern irrigation and cultivation techniques, production from this area could greatly lessen Iran's dependence on foreign food supplies. (U)

The 2.2 million people of Khuzestan constitute about 6.5 percent of the nation's total population. About two-thirds of the Khuzestanis are Arabs, many with strong ties to Arab communities in neighboring Iraq and other Gulf states. Almost all of the Persians and more than half of the Arabs are Shias; the other Arabs are Sunnis. (U)

Despite their minority status, the Persians dominate Khuzestan socially, economically, and politically. Increasingly, the Arabs resent it. Noting that the revolution has not improved their station, the Arabs, who were virulently anti-Shah, are now becoming anti-Khomeini. (U)

Sporadic acts of sabotage attributed to dissident Arabs disrupted production and distribution of oil and gas in Khuzestan last year, but have not had any appreciable effect on exports in recent months. (U)

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Iran's Khuzestan Province (U)

The Khuzestan plain, situated in southwestern Iran at the head of the Persian Gulf, is strategically and economically the most important region in Iran.

Located in Khuzestan are:

- Most of Iran's oil and gas fields, the chief source of its income.
- The Rud-e Karun (river) system, the largest volume of freshwater in this water-deficient country.
- The ports (and land routes to them) through which pass most of Iran's imports and exports. (U)

Vital as this region is to Iran, it is neither physically nor culturally part of the Persian heartland. Instead, Khuzestan is an eastern extension of the Mesopotamian flood plain, the remainder of which is in Iraq. The bulk of Khuzestan's inhabitants are Arab tribesmen with strong cultural and kinship ties to Arabs in neighboring Iraq and the Gulf states.

Historically, the hot, enervating climate of Khuzestan did not appeal to the highland-dwelling Persians, and even today, the typical Persian technocrat working in Khuzestan does not plan to settle there permanently. (U)

The Land

Khuzestan is a large expanse of lowland on the southwestern flank of the Zagros Mountains. Part of the plain formed from the sedimentary deposits of the Rud-e Karkheh Kur and the Rud-e Karun, Khuzestan is shaped roughly like a triangle; its apex is at Dezful, where begins the tortuous route through the mountains to Tehran and the interior plateau, and its base extends eastward from the Iraqi border about 200 kilometers along the shoreline of the Persian Gulf. (U)

The city of Ahvaz in central Khuzestan is situated on the Rud-e Karun at the point where a break in the slope of the plain causes rapids that bar further

navigation upstream. Ahvaz is a useful geographic reference point in Khuzestan:

- North of Ahvaz the land is rolling and fertile and with irrigation would be suitable for agricultural development.
- East of Ahvaz a region of low but rugged hills rarely more than 500 meters high extends from the northwest to the southeast along the base of the Zagros range. In this corduroy territory are located most of the major Iranian oilfields.
- South of Ahvaz a flat expanse of terrain stretches about 125 kilometers to the Gulf. Poorly drained and subject to flooding, it contains large areas of marshland, mangrove swamps, and salt desert. Agriculture in this region is limited to the fig groves along the larger streams. (U)

North and east of Khuzestan, the Zagros Mountains make a formidable natural boundary. To the west the Iran-Iraq border runs through sparsely inhabited marshland and along the Shatt al-Arab (Tigris River). To the south lies the shore of the Persian Gulf. (U)

Weather and Climate

Khuzestan is hot and dry most of the year, although its winters are relatively mild. Mean daily minimum temperatures in the winter range from 8° to 12° Celsius. In the summer, mean daily maximums range from 42° to 46° Celsius. (The highest temperature ever recorded in Khuzestan was a scorching 53° Celsius at Abadan.) The region averages only 6 to 8 inches of rain annually, with about half of it falling from December through March. (U)

History

Ruins of former civilizations indicate that man has inhabited Khuzestan for at least 4,000 years. In ancient times thriving settlements existed at the sites of such present-day cities as Abadan, Khorramshahr,

Ahvaz, and Dezful. Those along the coast were trading centers, and those on the upper plain between modern Ahvaz and Dezful were centers of civilization based on agriculture. Notable among the latter was the ancient kingdom of Elam (1200-640 B.C.) whose capital, Susa, was located about 25 kilometers south of Dezful. In 640 B.C. the Assyrians absorbed Elam and destroyed Susa. (U)

Under Cyrus the Great (550-529 B.C.) the region became part of the Persian Empire that eventually stretched from the Indus to the Mediterranean. Cyrus rebuilt Susa and made it his Persian capital. (U)

In those days the region—then called Susiana—was famous for its production of large amounts of wheat and barley. Traces of old canals indicate that agriculture then, as now, was dependent on irrigation. The evidence suggests that increasing soil salinity probably caused by waterlogging led to a gradual decline in soil fertility and a consequent withering of the ancient agricultural civilizations of the region. (U)

During the thousand years after Cyrus the area changed hands several times, eventually becoming part of the Neo-Persian Empire of the Sassanidae (A.D. 226-641). Between 633 and 651, Arabs espousing the militant new Islamic faith invaded and conquered all of Iran. The seminomadic Arab tribesmen who moved into Khuzestan (apparently by then rather depopulated) established a settlement pattern and economy based partly on agriculture and partly on herding that endured there until the 20th century. (U)

Aside from a period of Mongol domination (1260-1353), the Arabs maintained control of Khuzestan (then called Arabistan) until it was incorporated into a new Persian state by the rulers of the Safavid Dynasty (1502-1736). Although Persia subsequently fell under foreign domination (Russia and Britain), the status of Khuzestan as part of Persia was not challenged; in the 1920s, when Persia was again recognized by the international community as an independent state, Khuzestan was understood to be a part of Persia, albeit a part largely inhabited by Arabs. (U)

Khuzestan's southern boundary with Iraq—formed partially by the waters of the Shatt al-Arab—has been a longstanding point of contention between Iran and

Iraq. Although the question was ostensibly resolved in 1975 through an Algerian-sponsored mediation effort, this border issue remains a sensitive one, especially since relations between the two countries have once again become strained. (U)

The People

There are an estimated 2.2 million people in Khuzestan, roughly 6.5 percent of the total Iranian population. They are a mix of persons with Arab and Persian cultural backgrounds. Although official Iranian Government figures tend to minimize the size of the Arab community, probably two-thirds of the citizens of Khuzestan consider themselves Arabs. Many have cultural ties with Arabs in neighboring countries, especially Iraq and Bahrain. Almost all of the Persians and more than half of the Arabs are Shias; a substantial minority of the Arabs are Sunnis. (C)

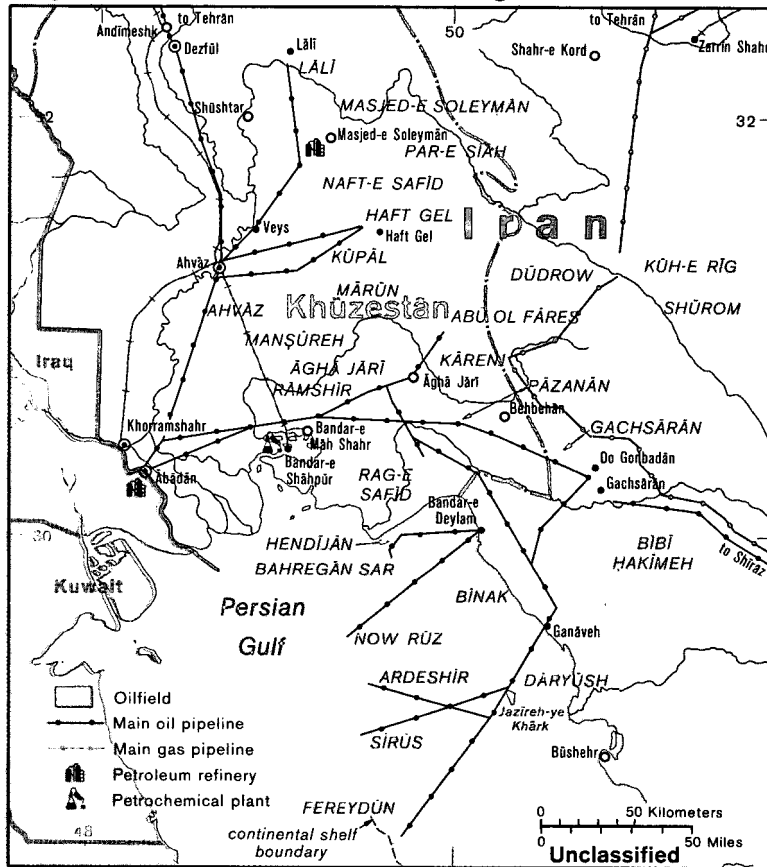
More than half of the Khuzestanis, including almost all of the Persians, live in urban areas, more than 40 percent of them in four major cities: Ahvaz (329,000), Abadan (297,000), Khorramshahr (147,000), and Dezful (110,000). The Arabs are concentrated in the eastern and coastal parts of Khuzestan, especially in the Rud-e Karkheh Kur valley and around the Gulf port cities. Khorramshahr is the center of Arab influence, and there are large numbers of Arabs in Abadan and Ahvaz. Persians (including Luri tribesmen) predominate in the northern cities of Dezful and Andimeshk. (U)

Arabs occupy the lowest socioeconomic stratum in Khuzestan society: they are poorly paid, poorly represented in technical and managerial positions, and all but excluded from the provincial administration. Persians tend to be patronizing toward them; many do not hide their contempt. The Arabs, understandably, resent both the Persian attitude and their own lowly station. (C)

The gulf between Persian and Arab in Khuzestan is of fairly recent origin. When economic and industrial development in the province surged after World War II, the native Arabs were poorly prepared to participate. Tribally organized, largely illiterate, experienced at little besides herding animals, few had

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Iran Major Oilfields in the Khūzestān Region



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marketable skills. Many were unhealthy, making them poor and apathetic workers. Consequently, just as the British developers of the oilfields had done early in the century, Persian managers tended to contract with local Arab sheiks for unskilled labor but to import skilled workers from outside the province. (C)

The Shah's government succeeded somewhat in improving the status of the Arabs in Khuzestan, especially through programs in health and education. Literacy rates are much higher among Arabs (especially males) aged 25 or younger than among those older than 25. According to the 1976 census, three-quarters of Khuzestan's total population between ages 6 and 14 of both sexes were able to read and write Farsi¹ at levels appropriate to their ages. In view of the present Arab-Persian population mix in Khuzestan, many of these children had to be Arabs. (U)

Better education and improved health have spawned politically conscious groups of Khuzestani Arabs increasingly angry about their second-class status. They are now demanding more representation in local government; the use of Arabic in schools and in the public media; and more opportunities for local Arabs in the higher echelons of industry, the police forces, and the military services. They want a "say" in Khuzestan. (C)

There is little evidence that either the local Persian community or the present national regime is prepared to make more than token responses to the Arab demands. Consequently, the Khuzestani Arabs, who were militantly anti-Shah, are now turning against Ayatollah Khomeini. The present turmoil in Tehran has obscured the battlelines that were beginning to form; as a result, it is not at all clear how far the Khuzestani Arabs are prepared to go in pressing their demands. They probably do not know themselves. Still, the stability of this key region is clearly threatened. (C)

¹ Apparently, most Arabs in Khuzestan continue to speak Arabic even though, beginning under the Shah, use of Farsi has been mandatory in schools and public media, the object being to "Persianize" all ethnic groups in the country and thereby promote unity. Consequently, most Arabic cultural influences on the Khuzestani population emanate from media sources in neighboring Iraq and the Gulf states. (C)

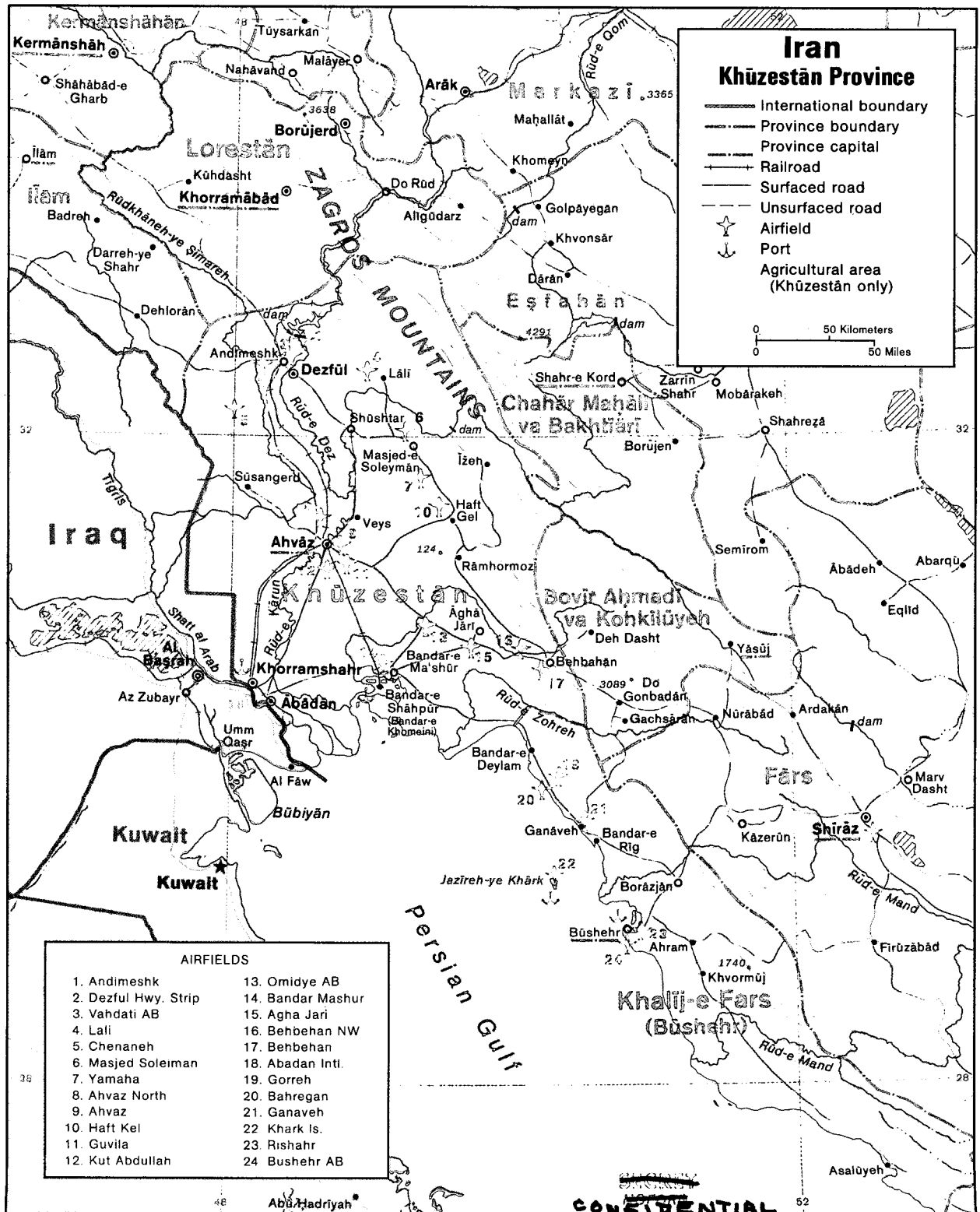
The Economy

Oil. The presence in Khuzestan of deposits of oozing material that burned readily was known in ancient times. Zoroastrian priests reputedly made use of such material in their temples. The first oil well in Khuzestan was not drilled, however, until 1902, when British geologists sank a test well near Masjed Soleyman. The first British production well came on stream in 1908. After World War II, increasing global demand for oil coupled with the accessibility of the Khuzestan oilfields to the Persian Gulf led to their rapid development. Subsequently, a support infrastructure was added: pipelines, port facilities, refineries,² and, most recently, associated petrochemical industries. The province now accounts for almost 70 percent of Iran's crude oil production. Another 20 percent comes from neighboring provinces north and southeast of Khuzestan. (U)

Natural Gas. Khuzestan and neighboring provinces to the southeast contain the world's largest proven reserves of natural gas outside the Soviet Union. In view of the relative ease of producing natural gas there, as opposed to northern Siberia where most of the Soviet gas lies, the Khuzestan region is expected to eventually become the world's leading source of natural gas. At first considered a near-worthless byproduct to be flared off, natural gas is now being exported, albeit in only small amounts compared to oil. As the quantity of economically extractable oil gradually diminishes, however, the major extraction effort is expected to shift to gas. Well before the end of the century, Iran will be exporting more gas than oil. (C)

Minor Disruptions. In July 1979 a pipeline supplying oil to the Abadan refinery was blown up. Khuzestani Arabs were widely blamed for this and other acts of sabotage that disrupted oil and gas production and deliveries for a while. Beefed-up security measures at oil production and distribution facilities, however, seem to have prevented any major problems from

² The refinery at Abadan, the largest in the Middle East, accounts for more than 60 percent of Iran's current refining capacity. (U)



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developing. Although minor acts of sabotage still take place sporadically, they have had no appreciable effect in recent months on Iran's oil and gas exports. (C)

Agriculture. An effort to reestablish the ancient role of the northern Khuzestan plain as a major breadbasket was among the most ambitious of the many economic development projects made possible by Iran's oil revenues in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the few underdeveloped areas in Iran where both fertile soil and adequate supplies of freshwater are available, the northern Khuzestan plain was selected to be the site of a huge agro-industrial complex. An international consortium of private companies, including several American firms, was involved in the project, which is still far from completion after some 20 years. (U)

The first stage involved the construction of the Muhammad Reza Shah Dam on the Rud-e Dez, which was completed in 1963. By 1969, about 27,000 hectares of land south of Dezful had been brought under irrigation and were producing crops of wheat, sugarcane, and sugar beets. A second dam, the Reza Shah Kabir on the Rud-e Karun near Masjed Soleyman, was completed in 1977; water from this reservoir was to be used to irrigate a large area south of Shushtar.³ It is not likely that much progress has been made on this scheme since the Shah departed. Nor is it likely that any real progress will be made until Iran reestablishes ties with the foreign firms instrumental in completing what has been done so far. (C)

The establishment of the large irrigated agricultural area south of Dezful displaced many Arabs from their traditional homes, plots, and way of life. They were expected to relocate nearby, take jobs at the project, and thereby share in the new prosperity of the region. Many could not or would not adapt to the new system, however, and refused to work on the project. In their disgruntled view this was but one more instance of Persian perfidy. As a consequence, farmworkers had to be brought in from other regions. (C)

Transportation

Ports. The four ports of Khuzestan have long been the primary transfer points for Iran's imports and exports. Their location at the head of the Persian Gulf puts

³ Both dams incorporate hydroelectric plants that feed power to the national grid. (U)

them closer than the other Iranian ports to the principal economic and transportation centers in the country. The Khuzestan shoreline is mainly mud and offers neither harbor nor deepwater anchorage; consequently, all four ports are riverine. Abadan, a major oil port, and Khorramshahr, Iran's main general-cargo port, lie more than 40 nautical miles upriver from the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab, and two smaller general-cargo ports, Bandar-e Shahpur (recently renamed Bandar-e Khomeini) and Bandar-e Ma'shur, are situated on the Khowr-e Musa tidal bay. (U)

Rails. Rail lines lead from the ports to Ahvaz, the main transport hub in the center of the province, and from Ahvaz northeastward across the rugged Zagros range to Tehran and the interior plateau. All are single tracked, which limits their capacity and will eventually constrain further development of the ports and of the region. (U)

Roads. A highway network supplements the rail system, permitting the transport of much short-haul cargo by road. Some of the roads are hard surfaced and of good quality, such as those leading from Abadan and Khorramshahr to Ahvaz, and from Ahvaz across the mountains to the north. On the whole, however, the road network is inadequate in both coverage and capacity. (U)

Waterways. The Shatt al-Arab is navigable by ocean-going vessels up to the port of Khorramshahr, at the Iraqi border. A canal leads from Khorramshahr to the Rud-e Karun, forming a waterway navigable by shallow-draft vessels between Khorramshahr and Ahvaz. It is used chiefly to transport light cargo. (U)

Airfields. There are 18 airfields in Khuzestan and six in the northern part of neighboring Khalij-e Fars (Bushehr) Province. Civil-air terminals are located at Abadan and Ahvaz in Khuzestan and at Khark Island and Bushehr in Bushehr Province. There are Iranian Air Force bases at Vahdeti, Omidye, and Bushehr. The airfields vary in capacity, but most have runways long and strong enough to handle C-130 aircraft. (C)

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