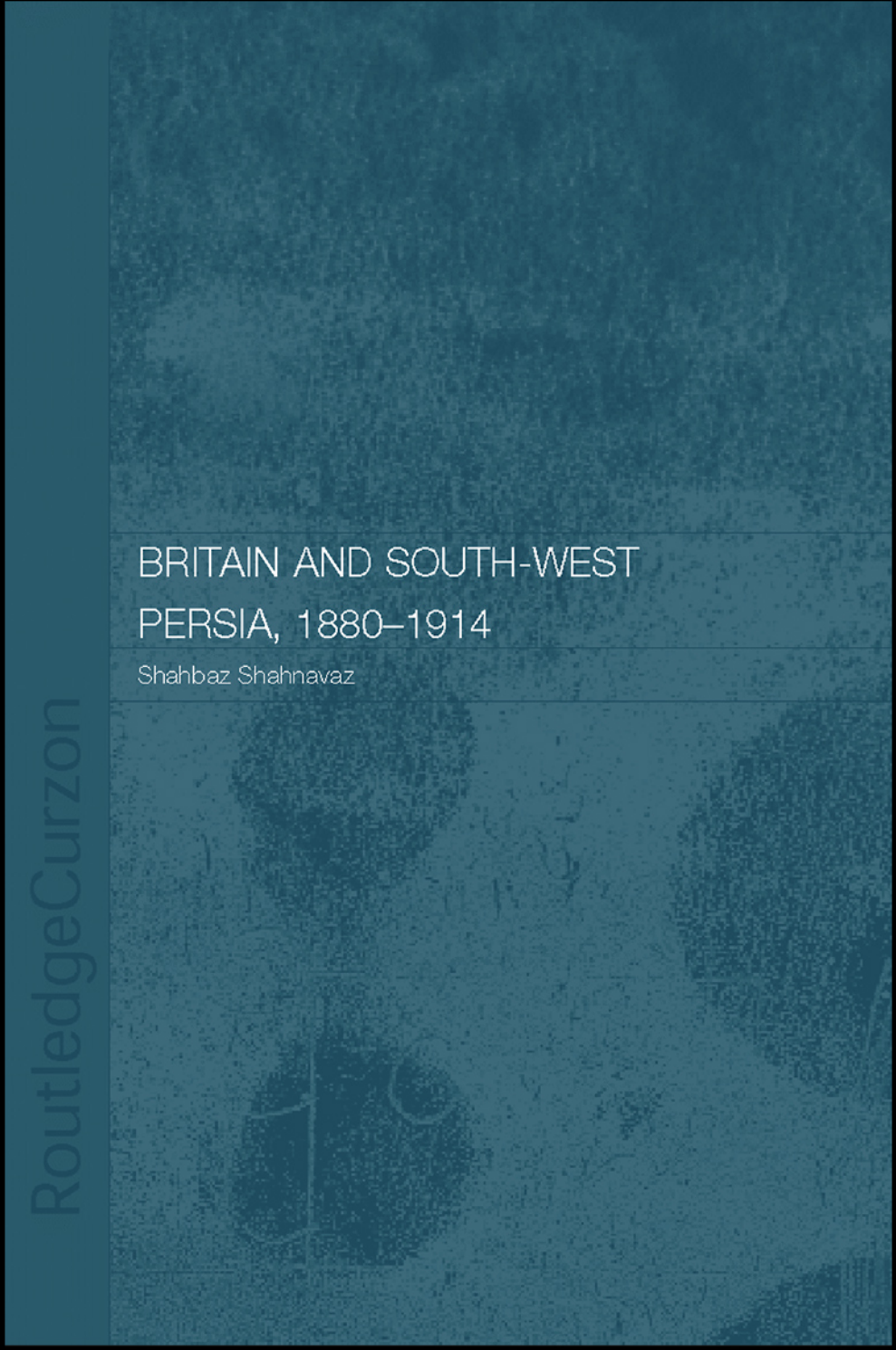

Britain and the opening up of South-West Persia 1880–1914

In the late 1800s, Britain began to put immense pressure on the Shah's government to open up the Karun trade route, which linked the Persian Gulf to the rich provinces in south-west Iran, to its trade and commerce and influence. In October 1888, these pressures resulted in the Iranian government's 'Proclamation', declaring the opening of the River Karun to international navigation, which solely benefited Great Britain in its attempt to penetrate the region.

This book examines the diplomatic activities and behind-the-scene negotiations which eventually led to the Karun opening, including an 'Assurance' given by Britain to the Shah against an anticipated Russian retaliation. It also provides a comprehensive analysis of the region's demography, commerce and industry both before and after the advent of the Karun, and the impact of Britain's political and commercial penetration, which eventually resulted in its total domination of the south.

Apart from its originality and other attributes which make it a genuine contribution to the field, this analytical study of the Anglo-Iranian relationship is also unique in its extensive use of the primary Persian sources and original material found at the Iranian Foreign Ministry archives which have been accessed by the author for the first time.

Shahbaz Shahnavaz holds a BSc in Political Science and an MA in Middle Eastern Studies from Tehran University, an MSc in International Relations from the University of London and a DPhil. in Economic History from Oxford University. He was a member-designate of the academic staff at Tehran University and has worked in senior consultancy and executive positions in some of the Persian Gulf region's major financial institutions and banks.

Britain and the opening up of South-West Persia 1880–1914

A study in imperialism and economic dependence

Shahbaz Shahnavaz

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To the memory of my parents
Mohtaram Pezeshk (Shahnavaz)
and Gholam Reza Shahnavaz

Contents

List of figures, tables and documents

Figures

Tables

Tables in the Appendices

Documents in the Appendices

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If there is any credit for this work, it should go to those named above. The faults and mistakes are all mine.

S.S.
Oxford

Abbreviations

A&P	Accounts and papers
Admin.	Administration, administrative
Amin	Amin-us-Soltan, Ali Asghar Khan
CHI	*Cambridge History of Iran*
EHI	*Economic History of Iran*, C. Issawi
Etemad	Etemad-us-Saltaneh, Mohammad Hasan Khan
FO	Foreign Office
Gulf (PG)	Persian Gulf
HMG	His (Her) Majesty's Government
IO	India Office
IOR	India Office Records
Malkam	Malkam Khan, Nazem-ud-Dowleh
MFAA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Iran
Moshir	Moshir-ud-Dowleh, Yahya Khan
Najm	Najm-ul-Molk, Mirza Abd-ul-Ghaffar
PRO	Public Record Office
Qaragozlu	Abd Ullah Khan
Shatt	Shatt-ul-Arab (Arvand Rud)
WO	War Office
Zel	Zel-us-Soltan, Masud Mirza

Transliteration

The transliteration system has generally followed that in use by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. To the extent possible, however, the system has been modified to reflect the exact Farsi pronunciation of the names and titles with a few exceptions, where the existing method has been kept owing to its widespread usage (e.g. Muhammareh instead of Mohammareh and Najm-ul-Molk instead of Najm-ol-Molk).

1 Introduction

South-West Persia, geographical matrix and the peoples

The River Karun (Figure 1.1) rises in the mountain ranges to the west of Esfahan. On the way to the Shatt-ul-Arab (or Arvand Rud) and the Persian Gulf it touches or traverses the provinces of Lorestan, Bakhtiyari, and Khuzestan (Figure 1.2). In the official correspondence of the period under study, this region was referred to by the British as South-West Persia and roughly speaking its limits were Kermanshah on the north, Hamadan on the north-east, Esfahan on the east, Fars on the south, the Persian Gulf on the south-west, and finally the present-day Irano–Iraqi frontier on the west. The term South-West Persia, therefore, was a geographical and not a political concept, devised for the sake of convenience. Throughout this book, then, the term 'region' refers to this area as a whole.

Lorestan, strictly speaking, included the Bakhtiyari territory as well as Lorestan proper. In 1889 the area of Lorestan proper was estimated to be about 42,000 square miles.[1] The limits of the Bakhtiyari generally coincided with the mountains and foothills of the Karun basin and the district between the northern tributaries of the Karun and Dez rivers, except that on the north-east flank of the Zagrus they crossed the watershed to the upper valley of the Zayandeh Rud, and in the south-east excluded the Ab-e-Khersin tributary valleys. The area within these boundaries was about 17,000 square miles.[2]

Situated on the south-western flanks of the central Zagrus, in the region of low Karun, lies the single largest expanse of true lowland within Iran. This riverine area, roughly triangular in shape, is defined by the NE–SW ridge of the Zagrus, by the eastern coast of the head of the Persian Gulf and by the Irano–Iraqi frontier. In the 1880s its area was estimated at 28,000 square miles.[3]

At its widest point, Khuzestan is between 120 to 150 miles across. From sea-level in the south for a distance of about 75 miles the surface is extremely low-lying and flat. The only breach is at Ahvaz. But farther north-east the physiography remains relatively flat. The transition from extremely flat plains to hill ridges and mountain is abrupt, but especially so in the Karun area.[4] The lowland segment, which forms a large part of Khuzestan, has considerable potential

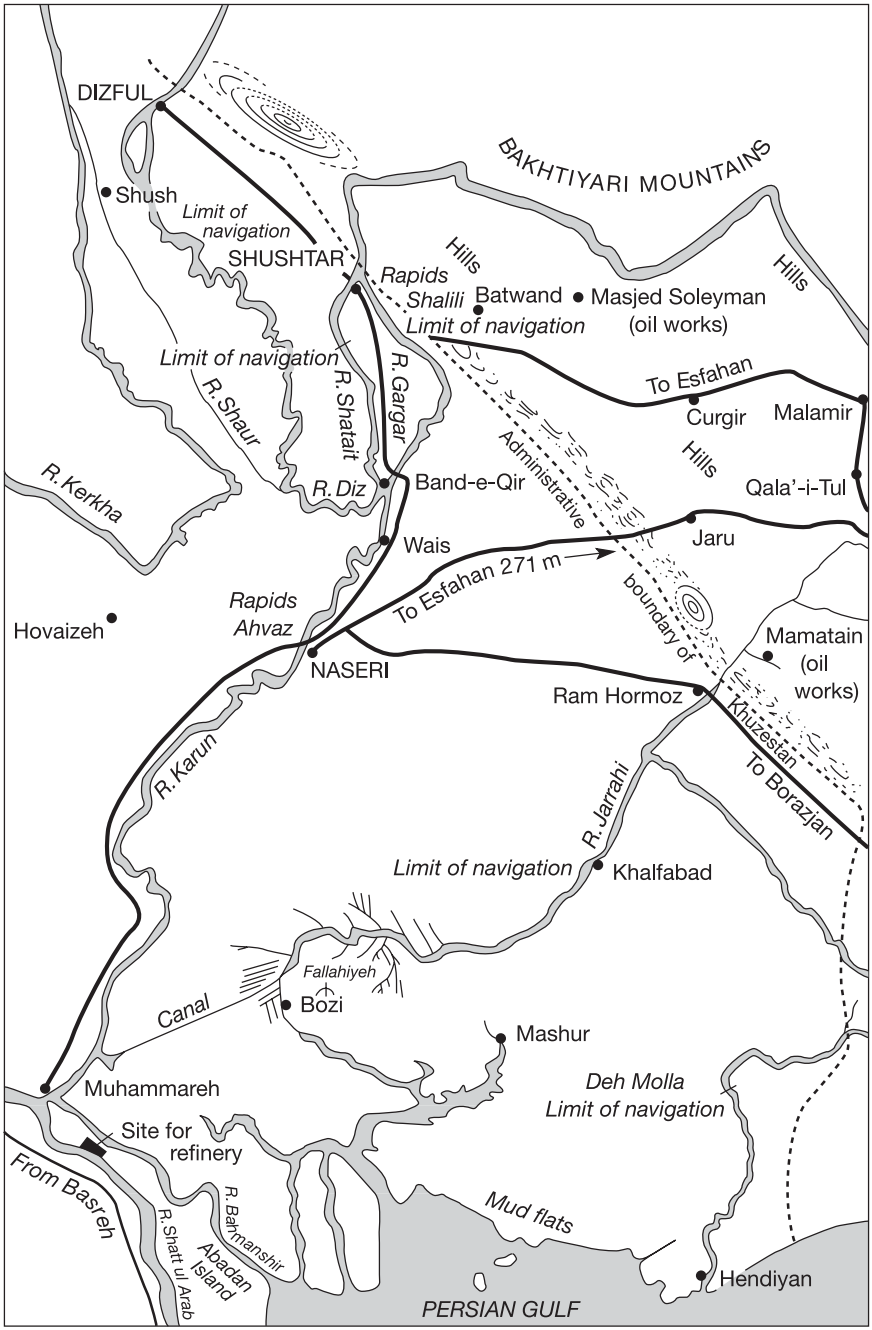

Figure 1.1 The River Karun and Khuzestan

for agricultural development since it is the best-watered region of Iran outside the highlands themselves and the Caspian coastal plains. Five great rivers funnel the runoff from 45,000 square miles of the high Zagrus into this plain of 15,000 square miles.[5] In earlier times, this area was famed as one of the most bountiful regions of Asia, producing cereals, sugar cane,[6] rice and dates in abundance. This was due to the establishment of an elaborate system of barrages, tunnels, and canals utilizing to the fullest degree the water resources. The rivers provided one means of natural irrigation, known as *faryab*,[7] which was much more common in the northern half of the province. The essential prerequisite for an extensive use of *faryab* was the necessity for the constant upkeep of the irrigation networks. This in turn presupposed the existence of security and a strong centralized authority to guarantee it.

Apart from devastations by Mongols and the hazards of floods, it has been suggested that other causes of the decline of the Khuzestan region in the past were the lack of artificial drainage, resulting in the rise in the water table under irrigated land. Waterlogging induced alkalization and salinization. Hence the Abbasids' desperate attempt to irrigate new lands of poorer quality and the conscription of slaves for the removal of salt crusts from the fields in the same period.[8]

During the period under study, the region was inhabited by three different ethnic groups, namely Persians, Lors, and Arabs. The population was predominantly nomadic. On the flat plains of Khuzestan were settled various Arab tribes, who at different times had migrated to this area, and of whom the most important were the Kabs.[9] The principal tribes which populated northern Khuzestan and Lorestan were 'severally known' as Feyli, Kohgilu, Mamasani, and Bakhtiyari,[10] all of which fell 'strictly under the generic classification of Lors'.[11] This region was an area of great ethnic complexity and admixture,[12] and the tribal units were to some extent defined by political, rather than ethnic or geographical criteria.[13]

From early times the population of Iran has derived its living from pastoral agriculture and has been accustomed to take its flocks in summer to nearby pastures. Such groups, although they lived in summer in tents, were not strictly speaking nomadic, though they were sometimes tribal. What distinguished them from the settled population was the absence of settled villages and their seasonal migration for short or long distances.[14] The main concentration of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in Persia since the early Islamic centuries seems to have been in South-West Persia.[15] Here, however, the focus of our attention is on the historical background to the population of Khuzestan[16] whose Arab population is said to have come to the province with the Islamic conquest of Iran in AD 641,[17] although some authorities believe that the settlements of some of the Arabs pre-date that event.[18] This influx of Arabs into Khuzestan, in any event, continued.

By the nineteenth century, within the province of Khuzestan, there were several Arab tribal confederations, the most important of which were the Kab of Fallahiyeh, the Mohaysin of Muhammareh,[19] and the Bani Torof of the

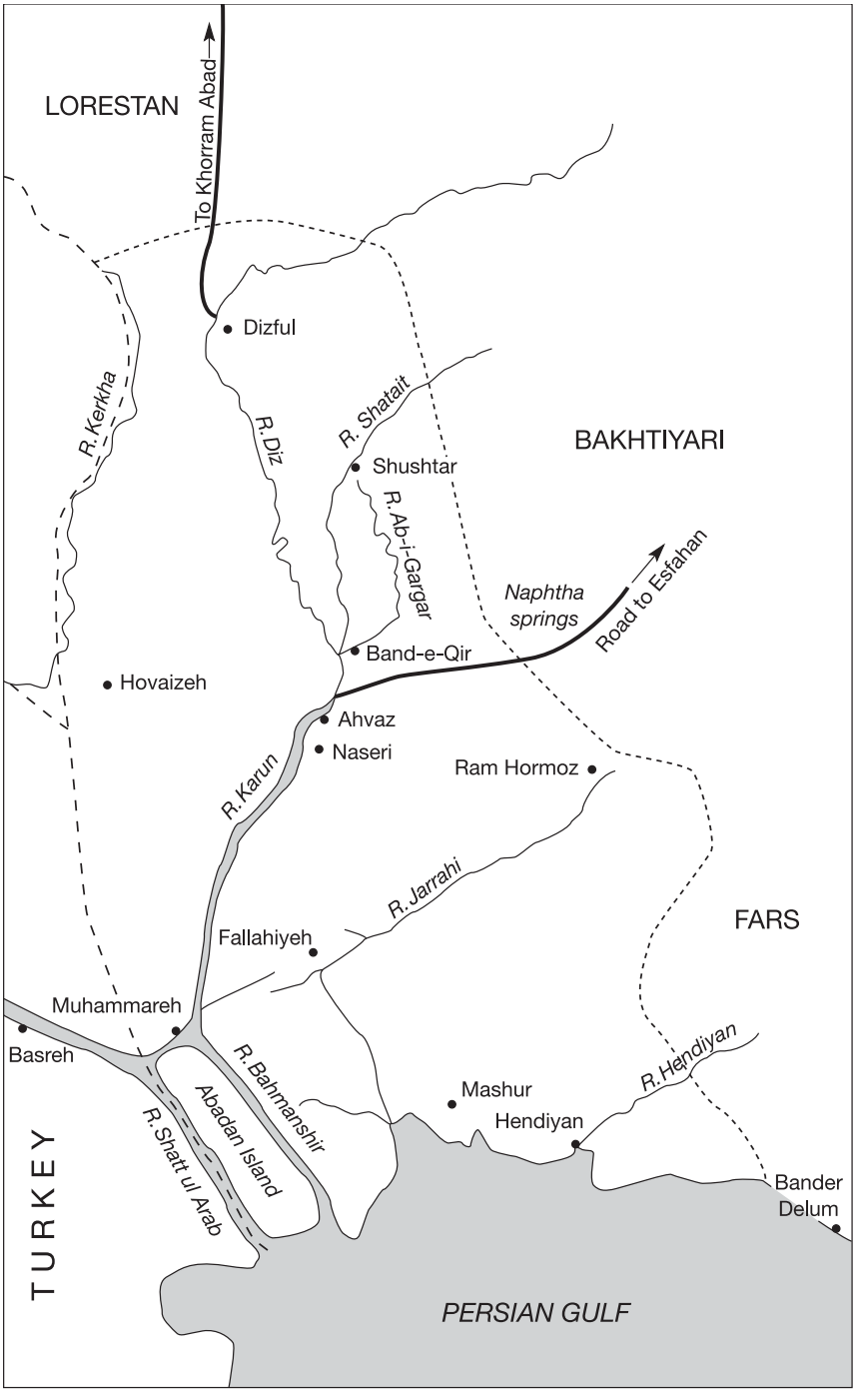

Figure 1.2 Sketch map of Khuzestan

Karkheh/Hoveizeh districts.[20] In olden days, all the Arab tribes of the province were united under a *Vali*.[21] In this period the most numerous and important of the Arab people were the Kabs of whom there were originally 72 tribes. In origin, Kabs are said to be a branch of the Banu Khafajah, which had emigrated some centuries before Islam into the present-day Iraq. At the end of the sixteenth century, they were first settled in Quban, a small village in southern Khuzestan.[22] At the zenith of their power, under Sheykh Salman in the 1760s, the Kabs held sway over most of SE Khuzestan and the mouth of the Shatt.[23] As a result of their contacts with sedentary Persians and Arabs such as the Mushashas, they acquired a more urban and civilized polish, and even adopted the Shia faith.[24]

It is from the campaign waged against them in 1765 by Karim Khan-e-Zand, and the two years of war with the British and Turks (1766–8), that the decline of the Kabs can be dated. Their acceptance of Iranian suzerainty, convenient and safe in the chaos following Nader Shah's death (the 1750s and early 1760s), acquired a more permanent and burdensome character as Karim Khan's interest in the Persian Gulf grew.[25] Salman's brother, Thamir, was the last powerful chief of the Al-bu-Nasir or the ruling family of Fallahiyeh, which after him sank into secondary position. Although the title of Sheykh-ul-Mashayekh was reserved for the Kab chief, the star of the Mohaysin tribe of Muhammareh began to rise in its place.[26]

The real founder of the Muhammareh ruling family was Sheykh Jabir Khan (?–1881) who ruled his tribe for some 70 years. It appears that, until the Anglo–Persian war of 1857, he was still under the control of the Kab chiefs. However, during the war Jabir, unlike the Sheykh-ul-Mashayekh who sided with the British, had assisted the Persian government, and was rewarded by Persia with the official title of Governor of Muhammareh and the *Sarhad Dar* (frontier keeper) and later, in 1861, with the title of Nosrat-ul-Molk. By contrast, the Kab sheykh was captured and sent to Tehran.[27]

After this episode, the provincial administration also put the Bavi tribe under direct jurisdiction of the Mohaysins.[28] The sheykhs of Fallahiyeh and valis of Hoveizeh (of the Montafeq tribes) also gradually declined into nominees of the sheykhs of Muhammareh. Jabir died in October 1881[29] and was replaced by his son Mazal who was murdered through a plot in which nearly all the sheykhs were involved. Jabir's youngest son, Khazal replaced his brother in 1897.

In the period under study, the Arab tribes of Khuzestan were divided into five sections or tribal confederations, each of which had its own sheykh. The tribal patterns of social and political organization of these confederations were similar. These tribal groupings were hierarchical in nature, with the tribal confederation being the largest and the tribal section the smallest unit of social organization. Between them there were several other levels, each of which was dependent on the higher level, and in turn exercised jurisdiction over the lower levels.[30] In theory, the authority of the paramount chief, or the sheykh, was supreme. But it was the existence of the 'Council of Greybeards' which distinguished the Arab tribal system from, say, that of the Bakhtiyaris. This was a

'very shadowy remnant of the elective principle'[31] which to some extent restricted the executive powers of the sheykh. For instance Khazal, as the chief of the Arabs of Khuzestan, ruled 'with the consent, implied if not expressed, of the elders of the various tribes'.[32] The exact duties, authority and composition of this council were unclear, apart from the fact that, as its members, the 'greybeards of the tribe'[33] exerted immense influence in the cases of succession. In the important Arab tribes, for instance, the succession rested to a great extent with the greybeards and as a rule the eldest and ablest member of the ruling family succeeded 'independently of any nomination by the late sheykh'. If, on the death of the sheykh, the greybeards were not unanimous, tribes 'frequently divide, each section following the sheykh of their choice'. In the case of petty tribes the paramount sheykh appointed the successor himself.[34]

It appears that the deposition of a sheykh was a more difficult task for the council. Again in theory, without the sanction of the elders the sheykh could not legitimize his actions. It has even been suggested that in Fallahiyeh, 'if at any time they do not want the sheykh . . . they would put his shoes together and tell him, "in the name of God go"', and 'the sheykh will not dare to stay, or will be killed'.[35] But historical evidence suggests that in practice most of the sheykhs did not pay much attention to the desires of the elders in this regard. As a consequence, the second alternative, namely the assassination of the ruling sheykh by the 'combined action of tribal leaders',[36] had almost become the standard procedure. Hence the great number of Arab chiefs who were murdered by their close relatives.[37]

Around 1890, the administrative partition of Khuzestan was into eight districts,[38] subordinate to the governor-general who was appointed by the Shah. These districts were administered either by a Persian deputy governor or by a sheykh of one of the ruling Arab families appointed by the government.[39] The central government's demands were comparatively simple: recognition by the sheykhs and submission characterized by the payment of taxes and observance of royal suzerainty. In order to achieve these goals, and in the absence of a strong army, the tribal policies of Fath Ali Shah were pursued by his successors as well. In other words, the Qajar government could maintain its position by its military superiority, its great prestige and authority, and its ability to manipulate and divide the tribes through the utilization of inter-tribal rivalries.[40] The tribal leaders and their close relatives were also detained as hostage for the good conduct of the tribe. In the absence of a powerful central authority, this tribal policy, although practical, could not always be successful. Hence insecurity became a hallmark of the nomadic regions of Iran. Naturally, the government's hold over these areas was shaky. This enabled, indeed induced, foreign powers, especially Britain, to manipulate the chiefs and influence the course of events in their own favour. Up to the late 1880s, thanks to the uncompromising attitude of Naser-ud-Din Shah, the British had been denied a firm foothold in the region. But the opening of the Karun afforded them just such an opportunity and they did not hesitate to exploit it fully and gradually turn it into a stranglehold over that part of the country.

Geography of the Karun river

Of all the rivers of Khuzestan, the Karun is the most important since, being the only navigable river in Iran, it 'is the most feasible entry into Persia for commercial purposes'.[41] The Karun rises in the knotted Bakhtiyari mountains, some 100 miles to the west of Esfahan, at Kuh Rang on the Zagrus. It then pursues a westerly course through wild gorges and upland plains until, emerging from the hills some 15 miles to the north of Shushtar, it turns sharply to the south and follows a sinuous course over the wide alluvial plains that stretch to the Shatt and the Persian Gulf.[42] An important right-bank tributary of the Karun, the Dez, flows from the mountains through the town of Dezful and joins the Karun at Band-e-Qir. Here, the geography of the Karun will be traced from the mouth into the interior. It communicates in two ways with the sea, by a direct and an indirect channel. About 40 miles from the mouth of the Shatt, above the entrance to the estuary at Fao and about 20 miles below the port of Basra, the Karun flows into the Shatt from the north-east by an artificial channel known as the Haffar Canal. The Karun discharges the greater part of its waters into the Shatt by this channel[43] the full length of which is about 3 miles.[44]

At the time of the Karun opening, the town of Muhammareh, which was later renamed Khorram Shahr and became the chief port of Iran, was situated a little more than a mile up the canal on its right bank. As a port even at that time Muhammareh presented unusual advantages. It could be reached by the ocean steamers of moderate tonnage by the Shatt and by the Khor-e-Bahmanshir,[45] which unlike the Shatt was completely in Persian territory. Thus, as early as the 1840s, some experts held the view that Muhammareh could easily absorb much of the trade carried on with Basra.[46]

From Muhammareh to Ahvaz, i.e. upon the lower Karun, the distance by water is about 120 miles and by land less than 80. Throughout this distance the Karun is a broad and stately river, commonly from 300 yards to quarter of a mile,[47] and sometimes more,[48] in width. The general course of the river in this part is NNE and SSW, and there is commonly from 13–16 feet of water[49] at high water and 6–7 at low.[50] On average, the draft of water nearly up to Ahvaz is stated to be the same as that on the Tigris to Baghdad (i.e. 3 feet 6 inches).[51]

After the opening of the river, the average journey time from Muhammareh to Ahvaz was 16½, and in the opposite direction 10½ hours. The velocity of a full current was from 4–5 miles in the hour, of a low current from 2 to 1½.[52] A steamer ascending the stream from Muhammareh would meet no impediments up to Ahvaz. There the submerged rocks gave rise to a series of rapids,[53] which created the practical barrier to continuous navigation. Above the site of the ancient Ahvaz dam other rocks, which crossed the bed of the river extended about 800 yards to the north.[54] Between the two reefs navigation could not take place,[55] but from the upper reef to Shushtar it was continuously navigable. The custom then was to unload goods at the lower rocks and to convey them on mule-back beyond the upper rocks, where they were reshipped.[56] The ridges

caused a difference of level of about 10 feet in something under a mile. In 1881 a British engineer, Wells, suggested a line for the construction of a canal.[57] Already steamboats had been taken more than once up the main rapids, partly by steam power and partly by tow-lines.[58] Najm believed that it was possible, by making locks or by some other means, to enable vessels to cross the rapids and proceed to Shushtar without hindrance. However he argued that the cost of such a project would be too great, and also that the serious communication difficulties, which existed between Shushtar and the interior would make such measures futile.[59]

Obviously having their own interests in mind, the British insisted that what Persia 'urgently' needed was an easy highway from some of its richest but most inaccessible provinces.[60] As far as the interests and security of Iran were concerned, however, this could be seen as a very good reason not to open up the country to the foreigners. The Persians could still remember that during the war of 1857 some British vessels had been conveyed beyond the rapids to Band-e-Qir and had come very close to destroying Shushtar. Therefore, Najm warned the Shah that 'to link Shushtar to the Shatt would be tantamount to linking it to Bombay and London. Why, then, should Iran incur great expense merely to open a road for her enemies?' Thus, he suggested that the Persian government should put two steamers on the Karun, one below and one above the *band*, and the cargo at Ahvaz could be transshipped by land.[61]

Between Ahvaz and Band-e-Qir, a stretch of some 45 miles, the river is narrower. The streams which converge at the latter place and from which the Karun emerges are the Ab-e-Dez, or the Dez which runs from Dezful on the west; Chahar Dangeh[62] (also known as Shatayt) or Karun proper that runs from Shushtar, in the centre; and the Do Dangeh,[63] also known as Gar Gar which flows from Shushtar on the east and constitutes the eastern boundary of the island so formed, namely Miyanab. The Dez descends from a distant source in the Zagrus. Of the trio, at this time the Do Dangeh was used for the river traffic to Shushtar. It could be ascended by steamboats for 45 miles, to a point called Shalili, which was about 6 miles from the town itself. The final section of the Karun from above Shushtar to its source in the Zard Kuh is not navigable.

Great Britain, the River Karun and South-West Persia

> Unkind fate placed Persia between Russian hammer and the British anvil. The struggle of the two giant empires, whether for Constantinople, Central Asia, or the Far East, were instantly reflected and echoed at Tehran.[64]

The history of nineteenth-century Iran is a history of rivalries between these two Powers. Each endeavoured to impose its own hegemony upon Iran through a combination of intimidation, naked aggression, commerce, and concessions. To use any of these, each of the two needed to 'provide herself with access to as much of Persian territory as possible, while denying it to others'.[65] The crucial importance, which the question of transportation attained in the last quarter of

the nineteenth century should be studied in the light of this intensification of competition between Britain and Russia.

Direct British trade with Basra dates from 1635, and the earliest record in the British archives regarding the affairs of Khuzestan is a dispatch dated 9 April 1767 referring to the Kabs.[66] The increasing commercial and political importance to Britain of the Persian Gulf littoral and the Gulf itself indicated the insufficient amount of information at her disposal. Hence the British attempts to carry out 'geographical surveys' in the area including Khuzestan and Mesopotamia in the first half of the nineteenth century.[67] People like Lynch, Campbell, and Felix Jones were among those who between the late 1830s and early 1850s were actively involved in these 'surveys'.[68] Selby also studied the Karun with its branches and affluents. Among the prominent figures who covered South-West Persia were Rawlinson, Layard and a member of the Russian Legation at Tehran, de Bode. Of all these 'surveyors', Layard's mission seems to have been the most sinister. Between 1838 and 1842 there was an undeclared war between Britain and Persia over the question of Herat.[69] It was against this background that Layard continued his 'remarkable wanderings' in South-West Persia. Persian officials evidently entertained strong objections to his presence in the region, believing no doubt that he was a British spy. It was also feared that some harm might befall him. Therefore, the governor-general of Khuzestan was said to have issued an order for Layard's arrest.[70]

One of his 'principal objects' was to open the southern provinces of Iran to British influence and trade. For example, on his 1841 journey in Khuzestan he collected 'a quantity of commercial as well as geographical and political information', and obtained promises from the sheykhs that they would do 'all in their power to promote and facilitate British trade, if established'. Layard, according to British sources, had 'explained to them' that external trade relations 'would tend to check local Persian tyranny and misgovernment'.[71] He also worked in 1840 as an intermediary between the rebellious Bakhtiyari chief, Mohammad Taqi Khan, and the British authorities. On behalf of that chief, he proposed that 'if a rupture occurred (between Britain and Iran) the British should avail themselves of his armed assistance against Persia, undertaking in return to protect him' and recognize him as the paramount chief of the region.[72] Apparently as a result of these relations, during the 1857 war with Iran the British local officials received some assistance from some of the sheykhs.[73]

The latter part of Naser-ud-Din Shah's reign (reigned 1848–96) showed evidence of increasing Russian influence and pressure in northern Persia, though it was 'rather commercial than military in character'.[74] Britain too strove to increase its influence in the south. Therefore, in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, Iran was under the thumb of Russia in the north, while Britain held sway in the south. 'We should occupy the ground commercially' and thereby politically, it was said, 'now that Russia is occupied in consolidating her position on the N.E. frontier of Persia' since, it was feared, as soon as it was clear there Russia would turn its attention southward.[75] Under these circumstances, establishing the Karun trade route, which meant the opening of the

river as well as the construction of carriage roads and/or railway lines to the interior, became the object of special British solicitude in the 1880s. By this time the great value of the route had become fully recognized.[76]

Thus in order to be able to respond to the politico-economic challenge of Russia, Britain urged upon the Shah the opening of this route which was equally advantageous to Britain from a 'political' as well as 'a commercial point of view'.[77] Politically, it would give England as the country which would most largely employ the new route paramount influence in southern Persia, while the possibility of bringing troops within a few hundred miles of Iran's important centres would naturally contribute to the re-establishment of British influence in Tehran. As a commercial enterprise the opening of the route had two major goals:

1 to divert the British traffic from the long, arduous and expensive route of Bushehr–Esfahan to the shorter one of Shushtar–Esfahan;
2 to develop and utilize the 'vast resources of the fertile districts of Persia to the north of Dezful', as far even as Azarbayjan, and to attract the produce of those areas which at that time either 'lie unused'[78] or followed the Baghdad route, to the new, cheaper and more direct route.

In order to put this move in its proper context, it is worth mentioning that in the 1870s and 1880s, British merchants complained that they suffered from two different types of competitions in Iran. The major threat, of course came from Russia while the other one stemmed from the Iranian merchants[79] especially in the south. They argued that some 20 years previously British merchants had 'almost monopolised the trade of Persia' whereas around 1880 English goods were 'rarely seen' beyond Esfahan, and even at that place Russian produce was sold 'in equal quantity with British merchandize'.[80] The British blamed this on the development of steam navigation on the Caspian and the construction of good roads from there to Tehran and Mashad. Further, the construction of a railway line from the Caspian to Tehran was thought to be imminent at this time. So, it was believed that if nothing was done towards developing communications with the Persian Gulf, British trade would be driven out of all the important and wealthy parts of Iran. The end of the Karun navigation at Shushtar was nearer to central Persia than Bushehr was, not only by the 170 miles of river and estuary, but also by the 180 miles of sea between Bushehr and the mouth of the Shatt. In other words, '320 miles of water carriage may, by means of the Karun route be substituted for as many miles of pack saddle transport by the Bushehr one. To realize what this means, let us imagine for a moment the whole traffic between London and Scotland carried on by means of beasts of burden, and then a line of steamers to be suddenly started between London and Berwick'.[81]

On the other hand this route was to some extent used by Iranian merchants, e.g. Sheykh Jaber of Muhammareh had an English-built steamer trading on the Karun between Muhammareh and Ahvaz. The British feared that if this trade

increased and Persians were thus allowed the privilege of using the Karun route, British commerce would be driven from the 'interior of Persia by the native merchants, who would be able to import their goods at a much smaller cost than the foreigners'.[82] The opening of the Karun was, as an over-optimistic Englishman put it then, a question of opening 'the whole of a vast empire, with many millions of inhabitants, and with rich and rare products to give in exchange to commerce with Great Britain and India'.[83]

In the 1870s and 1880s, numerous proposals were made to the Iranian government for the opening of the Karun route, but the Shah had successfully resisted the pressures and blocked them. However, it seems that the arrival in Tehran of Sir Henry Drummond Wolff changed everything.

2 British policy in Persia and Wolff's mission

Sir Henry Drummond Wolff and his mission

> Wolff is a magician, an enchanter. He goes to Egypt, and arranges everything to the advantage of England; He starts for Turkey, and a revolution in England's favour breaks out at Philippoli. He arrives at Tehran, and in the course of a few months Persian affairs assume a perfectly new aspect.[1]

The appointment of Wolff to Tehran in 1888 showed renewed interest on the part of Britain in Persia. For almost two and a half years a junior diplomat had been in charge of the British Legation[2] whereas the Russian Legation for most of this period had been headed by Prince Dolgorouki.[3] An ambitious and aggressive diplomat with a sense of his own and his country's superiority, Dolgorouki was convinced that 'the torch of Russia's historic mission in the East had been handed to him personally that he might encompass some great deal by its light'.[4] Upon arriving in Tehran, therefore, he assumed with the Shah and his ministers the tone of the ruler of a conquered province. Russia intimated in no uncertain terms that Persia should place itself under Russia's exclusive tutelage and protection.[5] This situation had been accentuated since the arrival of the prince whose high-handed behaviour offended and frightened the Shah, who found it 'nearly intolerable'.[6] As a result of this, he turned for help to Nicolson. By 1888 the Shah's despair became acute enough to convince Nicolson that some definite statement of goodwill had to be forthcoming in order to avert his wholesale capitulation to Russia.[7] The Shah told the British envoy that he did not expect Britain to give him money or arms but a firm guarantee. He wished to be perfectly sure that, should Russia seize Persian territory, England 'will demand the evacuation or take measures where she can strike Russia, as would cause the latter to hesitate in her action'.[8] Salisbury replied that the integrity of Persia was very important to his government but England could not pledge itself to go to war 'in eventualities which could not even vaguely be foreseen'.[9]

This was the state of Anglo-Persian relations before Wolff's appointment. Consultations between the India Office and the Foreign Office had been taking place since 1885 on the subject of Ronald Thomson's successor.[10] There were

different candidates including Rawlinson for the job, but the choice finally devolved upon Wolff, who in December 1887 was appointed to Tehran,[11] and whose appointment was approved by the Shah with 'much pleasure'.[12] Son of Joseph Wolff, the well-known missionary whose journey to Bokhara in 1843 had captured the early Victorian imagination, Sir Henry was a remarkable individual. Well educated, clever, and outwardly cynical, Wolff has been described as a 'true representative of a nation that was becoming emotionally conscious of its imperial destiny'.[13] His diplomatic experience had already been long and his work 'praiseworthy'. He was a many-sided and ambitious man who energetically probed and investigated every line of procedure.[14] He poured forth an unending stream of commercial and diplomatic ideas and schemes.[15] However, perhaps the crucial point was that Wolff had ties to both the City and Westminster. He sat in the House of Commons, was a founder of the Primrose League, and numbered among his friends the Rothschilds, the Sassoons, and Julius de Reuter.[16] It might not be irrelevant to point out that he was of Jewish descent.[17] He also boasted about his intimate relations with Lord Randolph Churchill.[18] Therefore, his varied past of high finance, domestic politics, and diplomatic missions in the Near East fitted him to play an eminent role in Iran.[19]

It would be justifiable to conceive of Wolff's general policy on Iran and the particular interest he took in Khuzestan. He arrived in Tehran with elaborate plans, ostensibly for Persia's material 'development'. It was believed that Persia was 'deplorably infirm' and that her regeneration 'must doubtless be worked out by foreign aid, and to some extent by foreign capital' but 'native' enterprise, 'native' industry, and most important of all 'native' resources 'must play some part' in the undertaking.[20] Wolff has been described as 'a perfect example of the spirit of imperialism'[21] of the late nineteenth century. He believed in the primacy of economics. Government and diplomacy were only means for the achievement of economic ends. When he came to Iran, Wolff's single most important goal was the so-called 'development' of Persia's natural resources and not only, as scholars like Greaves suggest,[22] the country's preservation as a buffer state. '[E]very encouragement', he advised, 'should be given to European capitalists to establish themselves in Persia and to develop its resources'[23] which at that time enjoyed a considerable reputation in England. Though no thorough survey had been made of Iran's resources, travellers from Sir John Chardin onwards remarked on Persian minerals and oil, and there was a widespread belief that the exploitation of Persian resources would 'dwarf the result either of the shaking of the pagoda-tree in India, the gold-seeking of Australia, or the oil-well enterprise of America'.[24] Wolff's own idea of these riches was somewhat similar. 'At present', he informed Salisbury only a few days after his arrival, 'Persia is a virgin soil; mines and forests of considerable richness remain perfectly untouched, and with the exception of the small line to the Shah Abdul Azim . . . railway enterprise is unknown'.[25] He was equally fascinated by Khuzestan's resources. He thought with the opening of the Karun, the province would regain its old prosperity,[26] and with little care it could be made 'a second Egypt'. 'Tobacco, rice, dates, grain . . . cotton, indigo, and opium could all be

grown there,' he said, 'Sugar had, at one time, been very abundant. Tent-cloth and coarse woollens were extensively manufactured while naphtha and bitumen are also produced'.[27]

In his aim of 'developing' and thus opening up Persia, Wolff had great faith in the efficacy of British investment. He conceived that the introduction of English capital, and the 'English mode of doing business will be of essential good to the country'.[28] But there were difficulties in the way. First, the British investors were sceptical of the Shah's regime. Second, Russia, if nothing was done to offset its influence, would block all British projects. His view was that 'the best hope of salvation for Persia' was to interest all powers in its independence,[29] and to combine its interests 'commercially' with them.[30] On the other hand, Wolff tried to come to an understanding on Persia with Russia, which was quite natural. What was, however, unique about this proposed entente was Wolff's belief that this could be achieved through the mutual exploitation of Iran rather than by rivalry and friction. Thus, before leaving London, Wolff had a conversation with the Russian Ambassador there, who told him that Dolgorouki had been instructed to maintain with him the best relations.[31] Therefore, upon arrival in Tehran, Wolff offered the Russian Legation discussions with regard to the future of Persia. Dolgorouki in turn urged Wolff to provide him with a basis for negotiations, which the latter duly prepared and delivered to him as a confidential letter.[32] In this document Wolff proposed a 'Convention' regulating the relations between the three Powers (with the third being Iran) and the appointment of a 'Technical Commission' with the object of preparing a 'report on the means of communication necessary to develop the natural resources of the country'.[33] The Shah, for his part, was to publish a 'Law' regulating the conditions of concessions to be granted for these undertakings, to establish a 'Commercial Code', and 'Mixed Tribunals' to administer this code. The Shah would also appoint a 'Mixed Commission' for the preparation of a 'Civil and Criminal Code'. Through the implementation of these projects, Wolff informed Dolgorouki, he hoped that 'we may arrive at a solution which may . . . satisfy the legitimate requirements of the two countries that we represent, and open a new field to the commerce and industry of the world'.[34]

Indeed, Wolff's proposal to the Russian Legation, and later to the Russian Emperor himself,[35] amounted to nothing less than a harmonious partnership in the exploitation of Iran and its resources. Dolgorouki's only remark was that 'the principal difficulty in the way of an arrangement was the fact that where British commerce flourished, Russian trade failed'.[36] So in order to alleviate Russia's fears Wolff was prepared to go even further. He spoke of the recognition of Russia's 'legitimate and praiseworthy' object, which was 'that of access to the Persian Gulf'. If carried out in a peaceable manner, he could not see 'why England should not give her assistance to such a project'.[37] This policy, if adopted, would have constituted a major departure from the old British policy of excluding Russia from the southern parts of Iran and the Persian Gulf, and seems wholly incompatible with the so-called 'buffer-state policy', which was allegedly being pursued by the British government and Wolff at this time.

Enough has been written and said about the political aspects of the Wolff mission whose object has been described as the 'revitalization of the buffer policy'.[38] But it is worth noting that, other than odd references to the desirability of the maintenance of Iran's integrity and independence, nowhere in the instructions given to Wolff by Salisbury was there any explicit reference to this policy. Nor was there anything about endeavouring to reach an understanding with Russia. Instead, it was stated emphatically that the British envoy should try to bring about 'progress' in the internal conditions of the country which, of course, meant 'opening the south of Persia to British and other foreign commerce by improved means of communication'.[39] As a matter of fact, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century it was invariably the Persian government which would raise the question of its integrity and independence and press Britain for an assurance of some kind against what was perceived as the Russian threat.[40] And, again invariably, it was the British government that would link this question with the internal 'development' of the country. It was argued that the establishment of British influence in southern Persia, 'where Russia has at present made little way',[41] and the opening of commercial communications in that portion of the empire by British traders was the best, 'if not, indeed, the only counter move that can be made by this country to the rapid extension of Russian influence over northern Persia'.[42] And in the instructions, Wolff was informed of the fact that the efforts of the British government had been principally directed 'of late years'[43] towards this goal, and the questions of opening the Karun, and constructing roads and railways were specifically mentioned.

On the other hand 'the hopeless state of misgovernment'[44] existing in Persia was even referred to by the Persian minister in London, Malkam Khan who spoke, as the British officials put it, 'earnestly and despondently of the rapid decadence' of his country, and of the 'general feebleness of the Shah's rule'.[45] These criticisms were, however, met by other British officials who, by virtue of long association with the country and its people, had a good understanding of the situation. For instance, Colonel Smith argued that 'the condition of the country is . . . far from being the hopeless and wretched one which such a state of affairs would lead one to suppose'. He pointed out that the people were a strong, healthy race, 'remarkably active both in mind and body, intelligent and imaginative in the very highest degree, and with a spirit still uncrushed by either want or oppression'.[46] Therefore, it was thought that the rescue of Persia would not be impossible, but the way to do it was the introduction of new social and economic, particularly fiscal, reforms. And Wolff realized this too.

In Iran, he embarked on numerous projects and carried through more schemes than had any British Minister for many years. The reasons for Wolff's success where others had failed lay in his experience, energy, tenacity, and perhaps his prestige. It should be added that the moment was opportune too. As a successful negotiator, he finally managed to alleviate the main stumbling block in the way of his plans, i.e. the Shah's dread of Russia's reaction, notwithstanding the fact that the 'assurance' which he eventually gave the Shah was neither as strong nor as clear as the Shah had always demanded.

Proclamation for the Security of Life and Property

> An Oriental government never had more than three departments: finance (plunder at home), war (plunder at home and abroad), and public works (provision for reproduction).[47]
>
> In his (the Shah's) person are fused the three-fold functions of government; legislative, executive, and judicial.[48]

In Iran, Wolff's first efforts were directed towards inducing the Shah to issue a Proclamation securing the rights of property of his subjects.[49] Only a few days after his arrival Wolff observed that he was much struck by the 'general demeanour of the Persians', and what appeared to him as their 'aptitude for civilisation'.[50] This observation was verified by other foreigners, officials and travellers alike, who had come into contact with Persians. For instance Rawlinson,[51] with his long experience of the so-called 'Orientals', rated the capabilities of the Persians far above their neighbours, and Colonel R.M. Smith, the man who was in charge of the Persian Telegraph Department for a long time, described them as 'one of the finest races in the world physically and intellectually'.[52] The soil, too, was 'extremely rich wherever water touches it'.[53] However, despite these potential sources of wealth, the country was generally in a state of decay. A British official observed that the poverty of Persia meant the poverty of the inhabitants, and this appearance of poverty was enhanced by the fact that 'no man dares appear abroad decently dressed, or with a large suit', unless a powerful personage. Such a sign of being well-to-do, he observed, 'would immediately subject him to extortionate pressure'.[54] As regards the general state of the country, Wolff too believed that this situation was a result of 'maladministration which itself is a fruit of mixed rapacity and timidity'[55] on the part of rulers. There were no courts of law, and justice was administered in a purely arbitrary fashion.[56] The authority, too, was arbitrarily exercised by a series of units in a descending scale from the sovereign to the headman of a petty village.[57] The Shah himself was very well aware of this fact.[58] He was in his own person the sole arbiter of Persia's fortunes, his word was law, and all policy emanated from him.[59]

This was the situation in theory. In practice, however, there were checks on the power of the sovereign and lower officials. The check that operated upon the latter group was the fear of their superior, and upon the Shah himself, Curzon observed, the fear 'not of native, but of foreign opinion, as represented by the hostile European Press',[60] and observance of the forms of the national religion.[61] However, subsequent developments and particularly the Tobacco Movement showed that the 'native' opinion was far stronger than Curzon could have imagined. Within the framework indicated, therefore, the Shah's absolutism was bound to come up against certain limits. He claimed absolute command over the life and property of every one of his subjects and even his own sons had no independent power – Zel-us-Soltan's downfall illustrates this fact very well. This absolute authority was exerted by the ruler in various ways.