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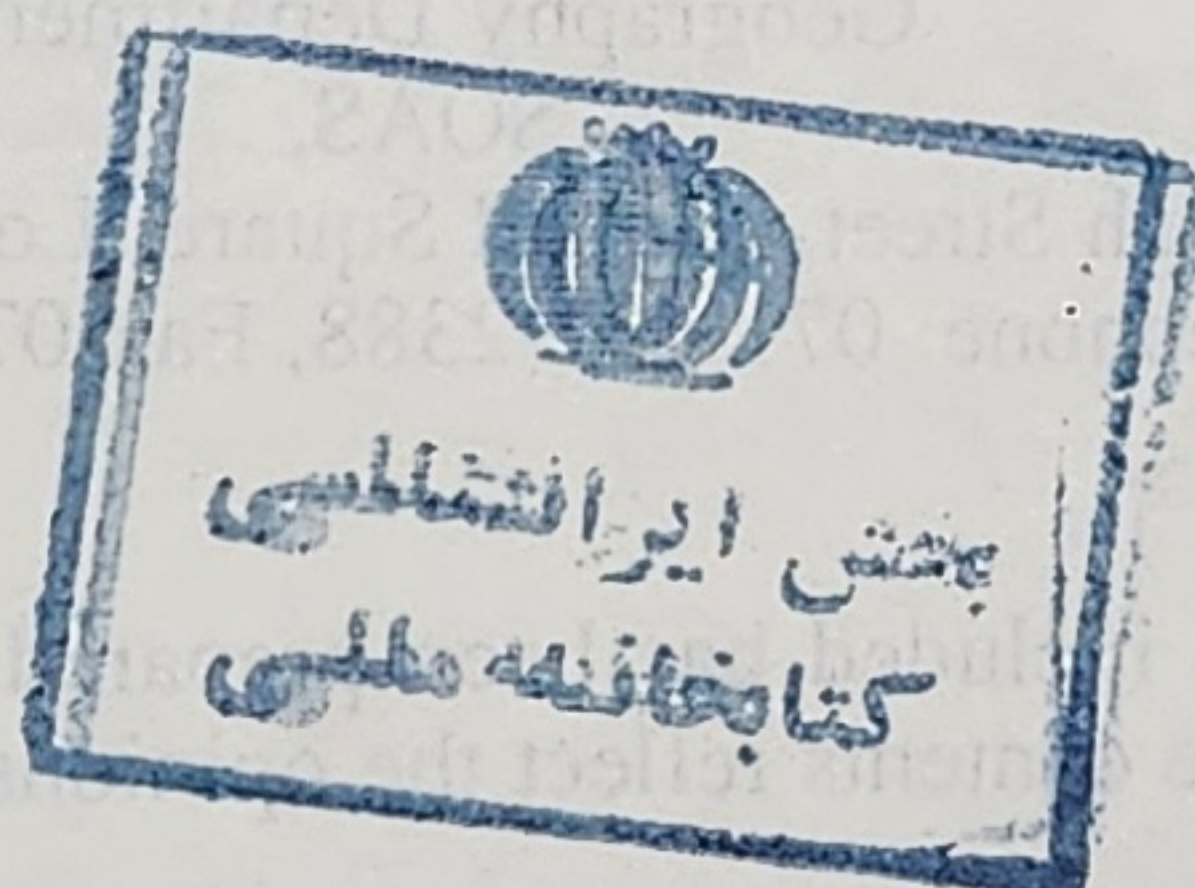
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**POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF
THE STRAIT OF HOURMUZ**

THE EVOLUTION OF IRAN'S ROLE
(1970s and 1980s)

PIROUZ MOJTAHED-ZADEH



بخش مرجع و ایران شناسی
کتابخانه ملی

20223 • ON

Published by the Geography Department,
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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Printed in the print room of the School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London.

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Acknowledgement

But for the encouragements of Dr .K.S. McLachlan, this work would have never been presented in its present form. My sincere thanks are due to him for all his advice and encouragements.

I would also like to offer my gratitude to professor J.A. Allen for the kind attention to and the supervision of this publication. Mrs Shokouh Mirzadegi and Dr. Esmail Nouri-Ala (Payam) were most kind to see to the technical requirements of printing the photographs appearing in this book. I owe them both an immense debt of gratitude for their assistance.

Last, but by no means least, if it were not for Mrs. Mithra Djarian's and my wife, Nahid Mojtahed-Zadeh's valuable time spent on the preparation of the text in the form of computer print, this book would never be published. I can hardly find a suitable word that could adequately express my profound appreciation of their time and efforts in this respect.

Preface

It was twenty years ago in 1970, that my first book on the Persian Gulf was published in Tehran. The book was published in Persian, entitled: "The Emirates of the Persian Gulf", and was followed by two other books, both in Persian, and a number of articles and research papers in Persian and English which have appeared in various journals ever since.

This publication is in fact a collection of the summaries of some of these articles and research works, and I hope it will prove to represent a contribution of some value to the Persian Gulf studies.

Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh
London May, 1990

Introduction

"Any warlike or commerce like government of the world that wished to open its hands in the Persian Gulf region, or to have an attack-starting point for establishing domination over the Indian Ocean, found the control of the straits of Hormuz as the necessary condition for achieving these goals, and to materialize these aims tried, first and foremost, to bring the Strait of Hormuz under their command.

The Achaemenian Shahs in the beginning and then Alexander the Great and the Parthians, the Sassanians, and the post-Islamic Iranian Shahs, the Portuguese and Shah Abbas the Great, and after him; the Dutch, the French, and the British, all made use of this plan in practice, and brought the Straits of Hormuz under their control and command. Therefore, it is expected the leaders today follow the way that Shah Abbas the Great followed in establishing domination over the Straits of Hormuz by expelling the Portuguese and then the English".

Sadeq Nash'at (Mirdamad), *Tarikh-e Syasi-e Khalij-e Fars*=Political History of the Persian Gulf, Tehran 1966, pp.616-7

This is an example of the kind of advice that prominent Persian Gulf writers in Iran had for a long time been giving the Iranian leaders. With the rise into power of Reza Shah in 1920s, some plans were put in action in the direction of reviving Iran's role in the Persian Gulf. These included the creation of a small navy, moves to repossess some islands, previously seceded from Iran such as the two Tunbs and Abu-Musa, and renewal of claims on Bahrain. But, since the death of Nader Shah Afshar in 1747, there was no real ambition in Iranian regional policies, enough to follow such advice until January 1968, when the Labour government of Great Britain announced its decision of pulling out forces from the region by the end of 1971.¹

The said announcement gained much publicity in the region. The minor states of the time (Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Abu-Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Sharjah, Ras ol-Khaimah, Umm ol-Quiwain and Fujairah). Seeing their vulnerable positions as an open invitation to new outside or larger regional powers in the Gulf, showed much anxiety as to what would happen after Pax-Britanica was withdrawn, while the larger states in the region (Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq) welcomed the decision with some enthusiasm.

¹ Parliamentary Debate, House of Commons, vol.756, col.1580.

For Iran, this was a turning point in the history of her role in the Persian Gulf. The end of an old colonial era, and the beginning of a new era of opportunity for her to expand her role in the region.

Ambitions were flourishing, especially after the Americans made it clear that they preferred that responsibility should remain with the pro-Western regional governments in the area.

"The Americans believed that a colonial presence in the region would encourage anti-Western sentiments and contribute to the overthrow of the conservative pro-Western regimes. In addition, this step was consistent with the policy of disengagement which America had followed since the early 1960s. The United States was convinced that Western interests in the Gulf stability could be safeguarded by friendly local governments, led by Iran and Saudi Arabia, and believed that these local "super-powers" were better able to keep the Soviet Union out of the Gulf".²

In 1979 two major developments escalated Iran's policy of self-reliance for defence and maintaining security in the Persian Gulf; first was that the Americans did not come to the aid of Pakistan - an original member of CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation) - during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. And the second was the fact that the Shah of Iran's earlier call for a collective security pact in the Gulf area in the wake of British withdrawal received no reliable response. Thus, being convinced that there would be a power vacuum in the Persian Gulf after the British had departed from the area, and that the Arab states of the Gulf would be reluctant in forming any security arrangements with Iran - much hoped by the Americans - after the British left the region made her to decide to take the initiative and move to fill the vacuum, by establishing control over the strategic points in the Persian Gulf. This meant that Iran decided to shoulder solely almost all the financial burdens of securing her interests in the region as well as those of the littoral Arab states and the Western world. In an interview in 1974, when asked why had Iran become the policeman of the Gulf?, The Shah had this to say:

"A policeman is the last thing we would like to be. We have repeatedly proclaimed that we would like to have regional cooperation, but if others do not have the means of assuring the stability of the area, we can do it perfectly well. Our life depends on it, not just our life but the future of Europe and Japan which respectively get 60 and 90 percent of their oil from the Persian Gulf".³

² Yodfat A. & Abir M. In the Direction of the Persian Gulf- The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf, London, (1977), P.65

³ Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in Interview with Newsweek, October, 14, 1974

However, Iran's strategic attention focused on the Straits of Hormus and its ports and islands, following the British announcement of withdrawing forces from the Gulf region.

"The Shah of Iran has seen the importance of protecting the freedom of navigation for the sixty ocean going tankers that daily pass through the Straits of Hormuz. The interest of all littoral states of the Persian Gulf depends on the continued security of the shipping lanes".⁴

Oil in the past two decades or three had become the main source of Iran's power and prosperity. Throughout the 1970s, oil accounted for almost 50 per cent of Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) and 90 per cent of the country's export earnings.⁵ Unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq which export part of their oil through pipelines, the bulk of Iran's exported oil and the overwhelming bulk of her imports must pass through the Straits of Hormuz. It was for this significance that the former regime in Iran regarded the Straits of Hormuz as "Iran's lifeline" and the Shah repeatedly referred to it as Iran's "Jugular Vein". It was on this basis that the former regime in Iran decided to bring the Straits of Hormuz under Iran's complete control. Moreover, Iran realised that with regards to the industrial world's dependence on the Persian Gulf oil supplies for an average of 60% of its energy needs (Europe 60% and Japan 90% in the early 1970s)⁶ which had to pass through the Straits of Hormuz, a full control of these Straits would increase Iran's international importance.

The Islamic Republic, installed following the success of the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran, did not initially share the same strategic views of the Straits. At one point, during the early months of this regime, president Rajaii was quoted to have said that Iran's Islamic Republic would reconsider the question of sovereignty over the islands of Tunbs and Abu-Musa. It was after the eight-year Gulf war broke out that the new regime began to demonstrate special interest in the strategic situation of the Straits of Hormuz and its vital importance specially in the war efforts.

⁴ Burrell R M & Cottrell A J., Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian Ocean, National Strategy Information Centre Inc., (1972), P.97

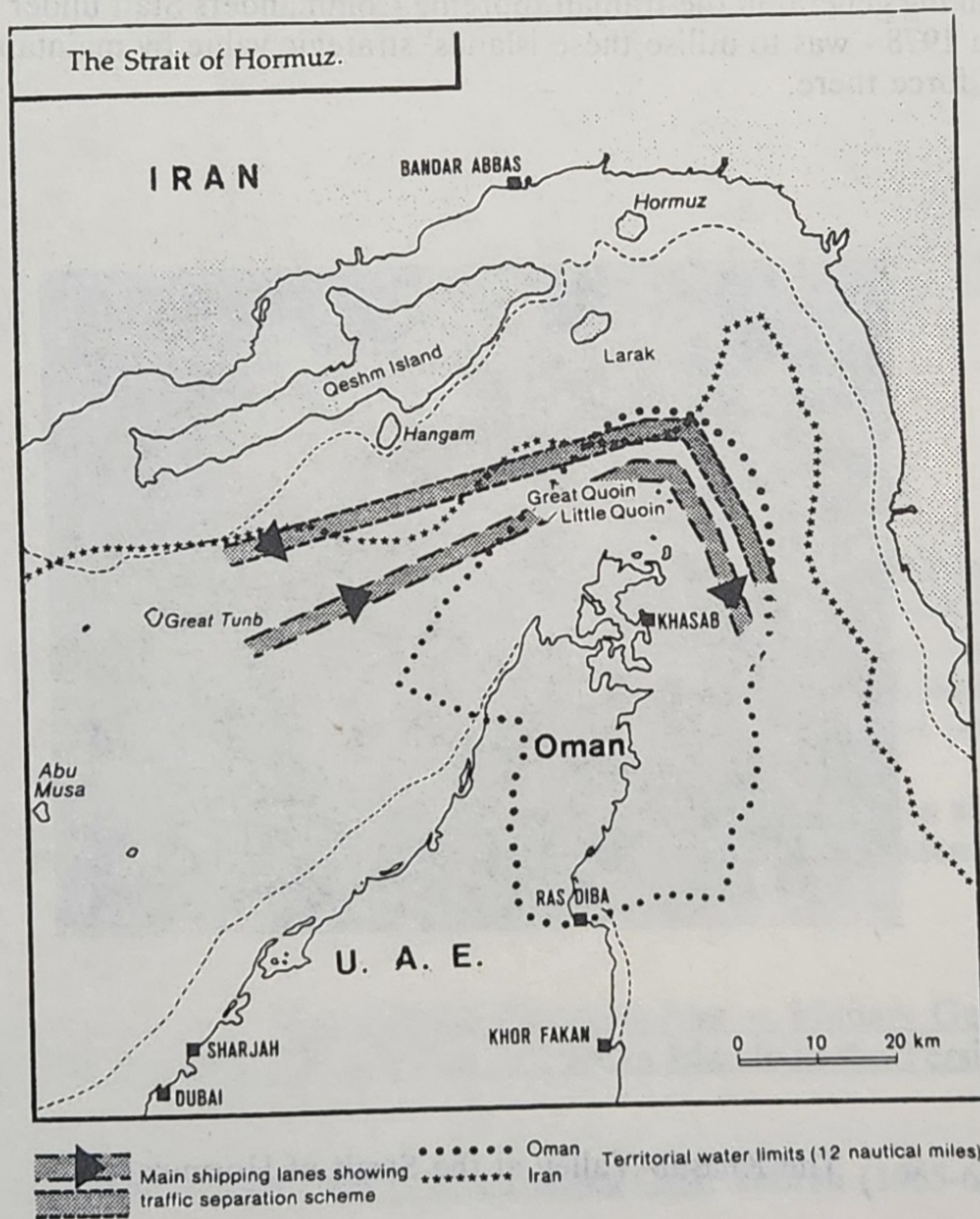
⁵ See; Marwah Onkar, Iran as a Regional Power, in Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf, (1977), P.39

⁶ See; Burrell R M., The Persian Gulf, the Washington Paper No.1, Washington, D.C., (1974), P.3, and many other documents published in the same period

EVOLUTION OF IRAN'S ROLE IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ

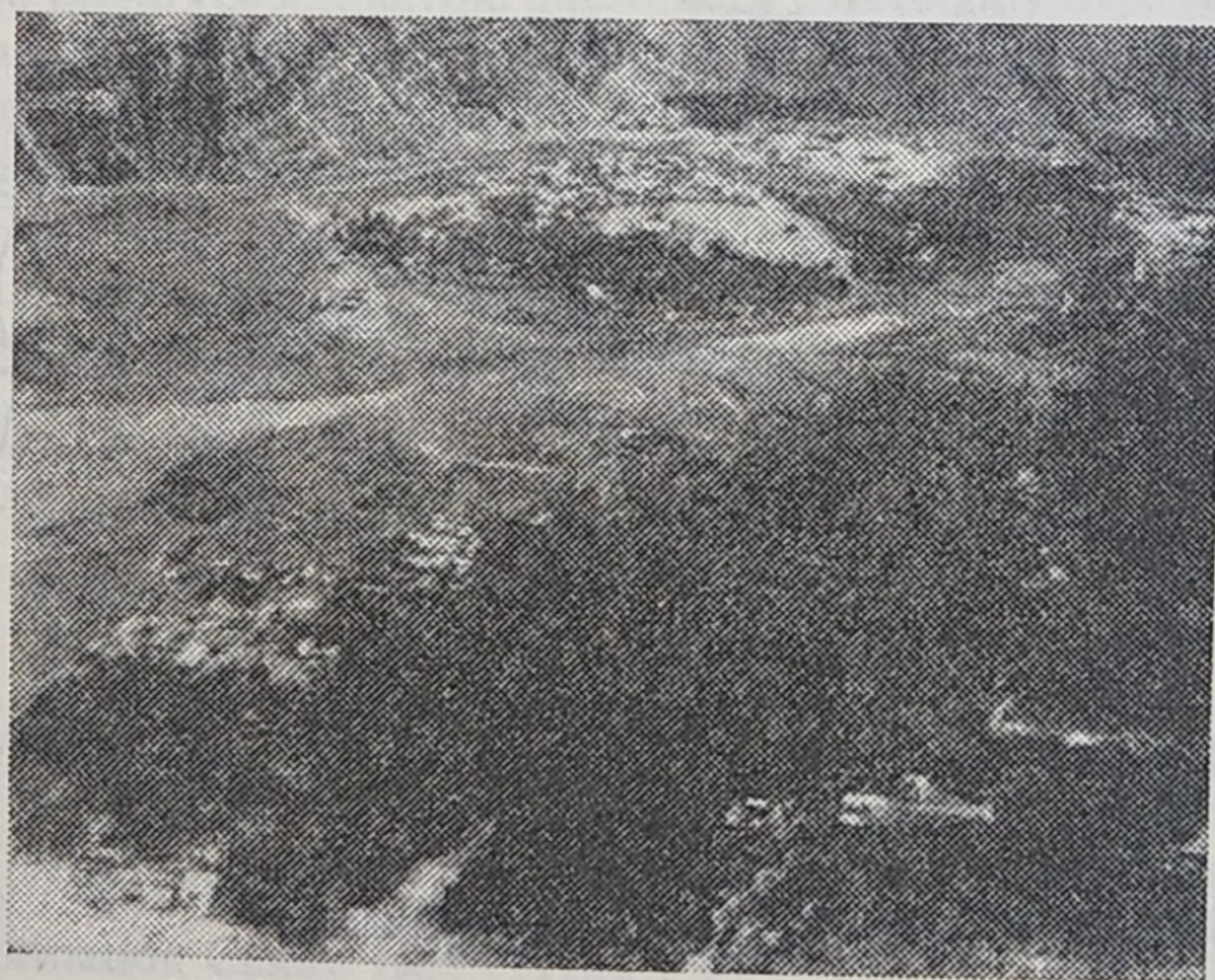
The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow and curved shaped channel, connecting the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, is approximately 100 nautical miles long (G - Blake, "Offshore Political Geography" p.137), disrupting continuation of Iran's southern mountain range into Musandam Peninsula. Thus, the Strait of Hormuz is a geological depression bounded by Iran to the north and the Musandam Peninsula to the south. The narrowest part of this Strait - 21 nautical miles - lies between the Iranian island of Larak and the Omani islet of Greater Quoin. Both Iran and Oman claim 12 miles of territorial waters there, which overlay in a stretch of 15 miles. Here the two countries have agreed to define a median line.

Figure 1

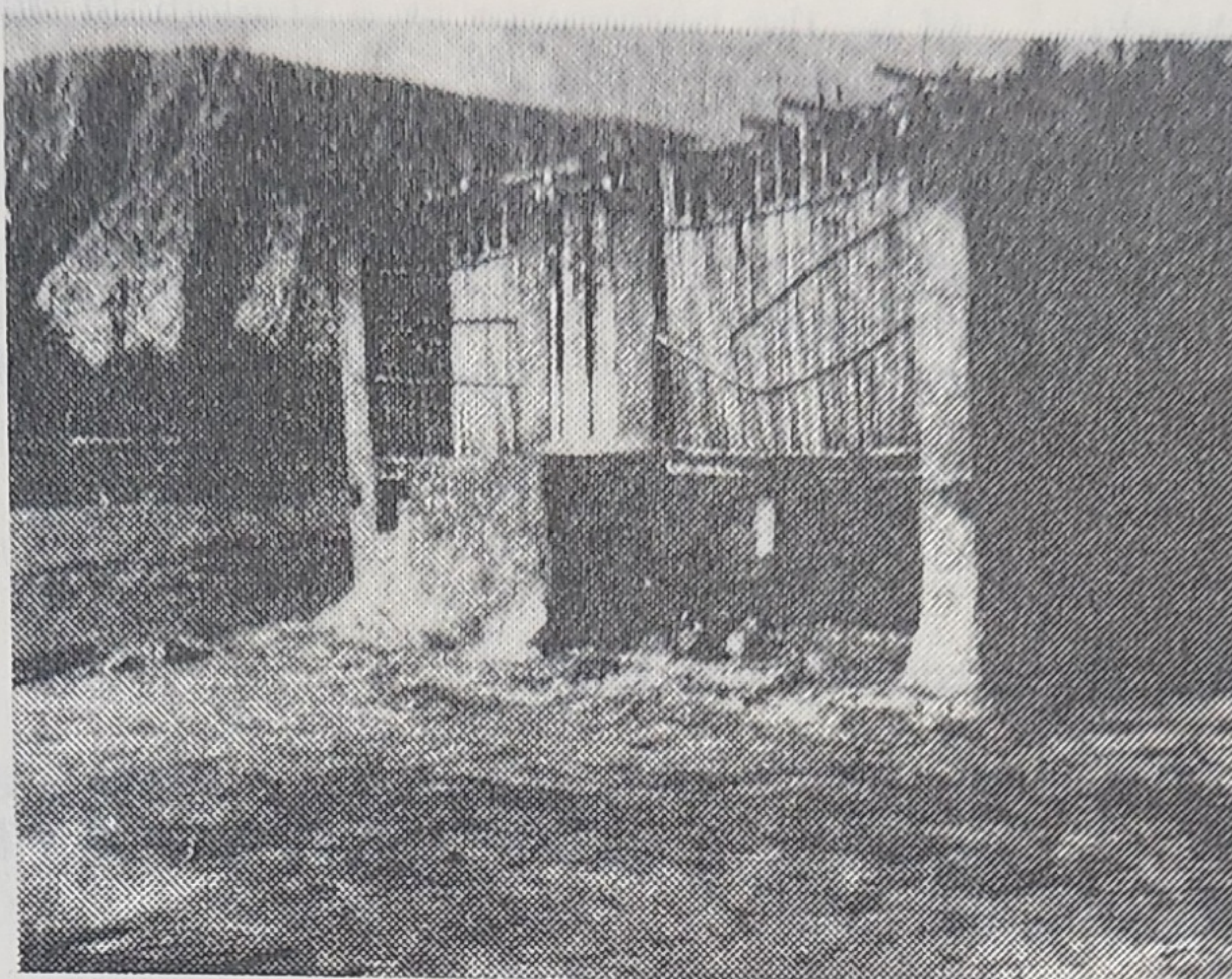


Shipping in the Strait of Hormuz took the shortest route between the Little Quoin and the Musandam Peninsula until 1979 when Oman demanded that shipping in the Strait of Hormuz should take the lanes beyond the Quoin islands. This was to lessen the difficulties of ensuring safe passage of ships so close to these islands and the mainland. The new shipping lanes, generally used since 1979, are about one mile wide each and they are separated by a safety zone which is also about one mile wide. The new shipping lanes are also within Oman's territorial waters. This means that Oman takes official responsibility for the safety of shipping through these lanes. Shipping in the Straits of Hormuz is, however, not restricted to these particular channels. Although the Strait's depth decreases towards Iranian shores, there are still enough deep water channels for large tankers to approach within a few miles of the Iranian coasts.

For the protection of the Strait of Hormuz against any foreign threats in the wake of the British withdrawal, Iran found herself better placed than any other country of the region. From the Iranian point of view, this was largely because, apart from possessing the strongest military of the region, the Strait could be better protected from the strategically situated ports alongside the waterway and the Iranian islands located favourably in the Strait of Hormuz and across the approach to it. Iran possesses a number of strategic islands at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, of which six islands of the so-called "curved line" are of greatest strategic significance. These are the islands of Hormuz, Larak, Qeshm, Hengam Greater Tunb and Abu-Musa. Iran's perceived strategy - as a top ranking general in the Iranian supreme Commanders Staff under the Shah told this writer in 1978 - was to utilise these islands' strategic value by maintaining a degree of defensive force there.



The Khasab Valley at the Strait of Hormuz



Fisherman's Bower in Khasab

An imaginary line (the curved line) drawn alongside these islands, which are situated within relatively short distances from one another, makes it easy to appreciate how effectively the shipping lanes of the Strait of Hormuz would be covered by the Iranian firing power stationed on these islands, he said. Perhaps a relatively detailed study of the geographical situations of these islands would help better appreciation of this strategy.

The six islands are:

1- Island of Hormuz

Hormuz, 8 square kilometres, is situated 20 km south of Bandar Abbas.⁷ This island - referred to as the key to the Persian Gulf for centuries - has strategically been regarded so significant that the Strait of Hormuz was named after it. A glance at the historical sources suggests that Hormuz island's strategic and commercial situations were highly considered by the local powers as well as those outside the region, throughout many centuries.

The Achaemenians used this island as a naval base,⁸ it has also been used as a commercial centre for the Indian, Chinese and other oriental goods and

⁷ Razmara, General Ali, Joghraphiai-e Nezami-e Iran = Military Geography of Iran, vol. on Jazaier-e Iran Dar Khalij-e Fars = Iranian Islands in the Persian Gulf, Tehran (1941-42)

⁸ Eqtedari, Ahmad, Khlij-e Fars = The Persian Gulf, Tehran (1965-66), pp.41-5

merchandise,⁹ and by the portuguese as a stronghold at the junction of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.¹⁰

In the modern times, that is to say, in the era of giant oil tankers which have to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, the island of Hormuz is still significant for its strategic sensitivity, albeit it is situated at a relatively far distance from the deep water channels.

Figure 2

HORMUZ ISLAND in contrast with Larak

profile from South-Western view (distance 8 miles)

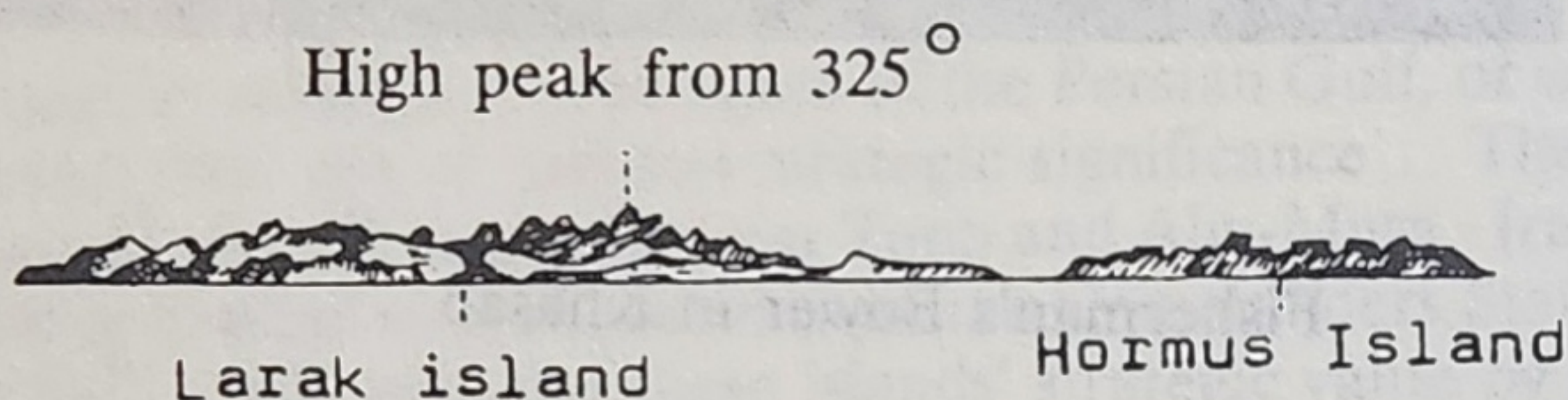


Figure 3

HORMUZ ISLAND profile from west view (distance 15 km)



General H. A. Razm-Ara 1341 (1962)

⁹ See; Sani od-Doleh, Mohammad Hassan Khan. Mer'at ol-Boldan = Places in Mirror

¹⁰ See; Nash'at, Sadeq (Mirdamad), Tarikh-e Syiasi-e Khalij-e Fars = Political History of Persian Gulf, Tehran, (1966-67), pp.402-411

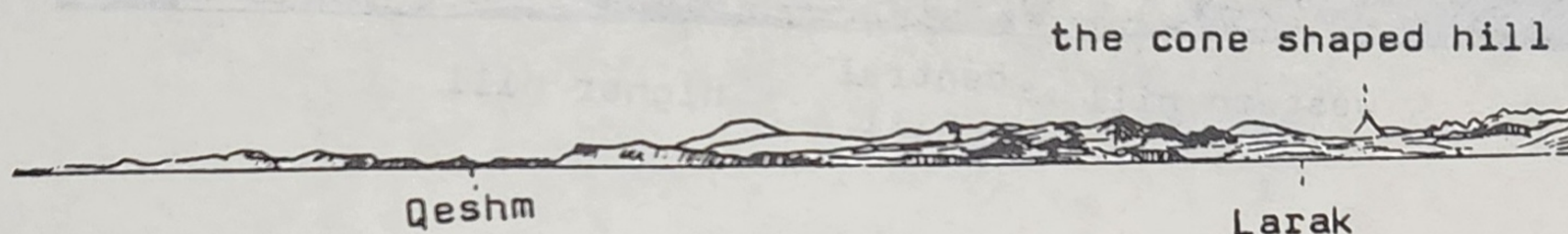
2- Island of Larak

This island is situated at 40km south of Bandar Abbas, 20km South-west of the island of Hormuz and 12 km east of Qeshm island.¹¹

Lark is the only Iranian island located close to the deep water channels of the Strait of Houmuz normally used by super tankers. The island's surface is covered by hills with gentle slopes into open planes in the east of the island towards the Gulf of Oman.¹²

Figure 4

LARAK ISLAND in contrast with Qeshm island, profile from 302° (distance 14 kilometres)



3- Qeshm Island

Qeshm, the largest island in the Persian Gulf, is situated 20 km south of Bandar Abbas, 40 km east of Bandar Lengeh and 31 km north-east of the Greater Tunb.¹³ The island is 140 km long, and 40 km wide at its widest points, while at its narrowest it is only 8 km wide. Thus, the island's shape is similar to an arrow-head and this is why Qeshm is referred to as Kish Island in many old sources (Kish is a Persian term for arrow-head,¹⁴ whereas Kish is the name of another island situated nearby).

Qeshm is a sand-desert island with some hills in the central parts. The highest of these hills is Kuh-e Bukhu (405m above sea level). The island's total population is estimated at 36,000¹⁵ who live in its 68 villages, the largest of which is Basa'idu. Recent archaeological discoveries suggest that Qeshm's strategic values were known to the ancient empires, especially to the

¹¹ Razmara, General Ali, op.cit.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Abdol Latif Bin Abdollah , Latayef ol-Logat = Dictionary, (1854), Original manuscript copy in possession of this author.

¹⁵ The 1966 National Census puts Qeshm population at 23957, Iran's Centre for Census Taking, General Census Taking 1966

Achaemenians. Since then, Qeshm has been used by successive powers for strategic purposes.¹⁶

Figure 5

QESHM ISLAND

The Three Hills at the South-West of the island

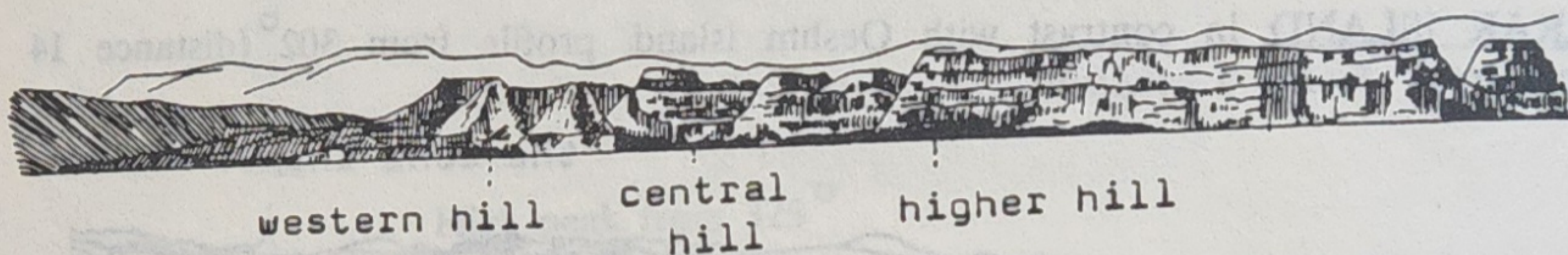
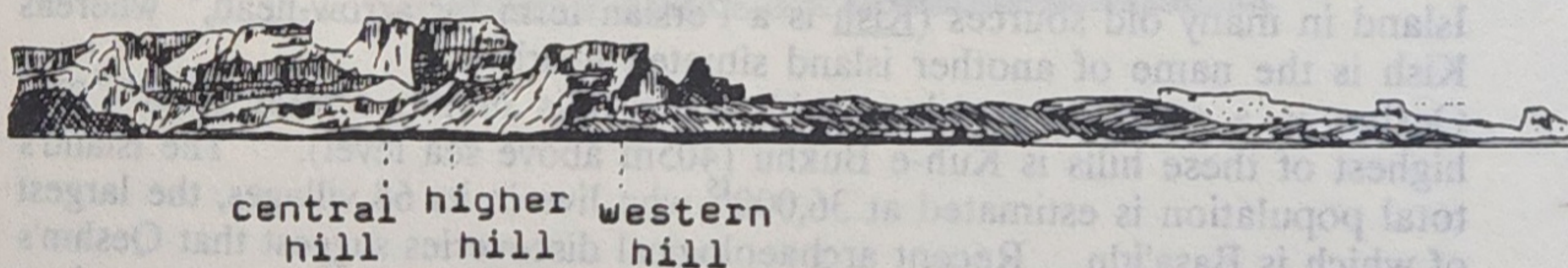


Figure 6

QESHM ISLAND

The Three Hills at the South-West of the Island (Westwardly View)

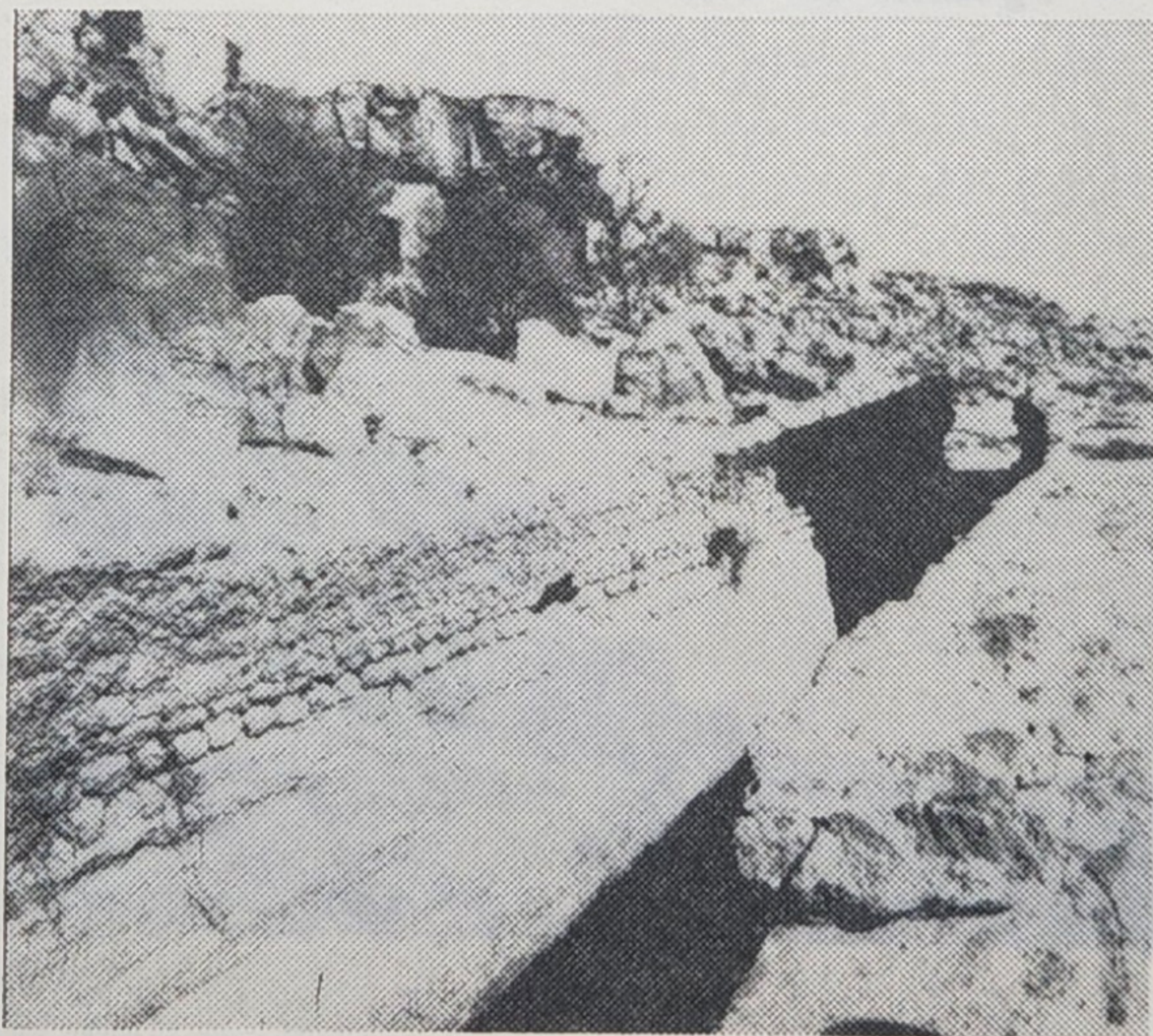


General H. A. Razm-Ara 1341 (1962)

¹⁶ See; Nash'at, Sadeq, op.cit, see also; Wilson, Sir Arnold T. The Persian Gulf, London, 1928



Ruins of an Ancient Rain-Water-Deposit in Qeshm Island



Ruins of a Rain-Water-Tanker of the Sassanid Period (Pre-Islamic), used until the Safavid Period (17th Century) - Qeshm Island



Qeshmi Women Carrying Water To Their Villages



Mountain Pass on Qeshm Island

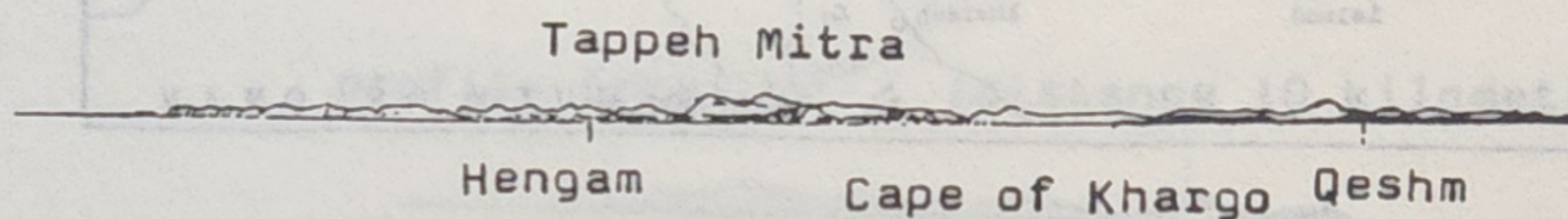
4- Hengam Island

Hengam, a small island - 3 km south of Qeshm - like Larak, is situated on the edge of the deep-water channels of the Strait of Hormuz. Its distances are: 60 km from Larak; 50 km from the Omani island of Al-Qanam,¹⁷ and 3 km from the Qeshm island (see figure 7). Hengam is 10 km long and between 3 to 6 km wide.¹⁸

Travellers have talked about the historical significance of this island.¹⁹ The British had established some military installations on this island, but gave them up during Reza Shah's rise into power.²⁰ Hengam's shores are more suitable for naval installations, and its deep off-shore areas can be used as suitable harbours for warships and submarines.²¹

Figure 7

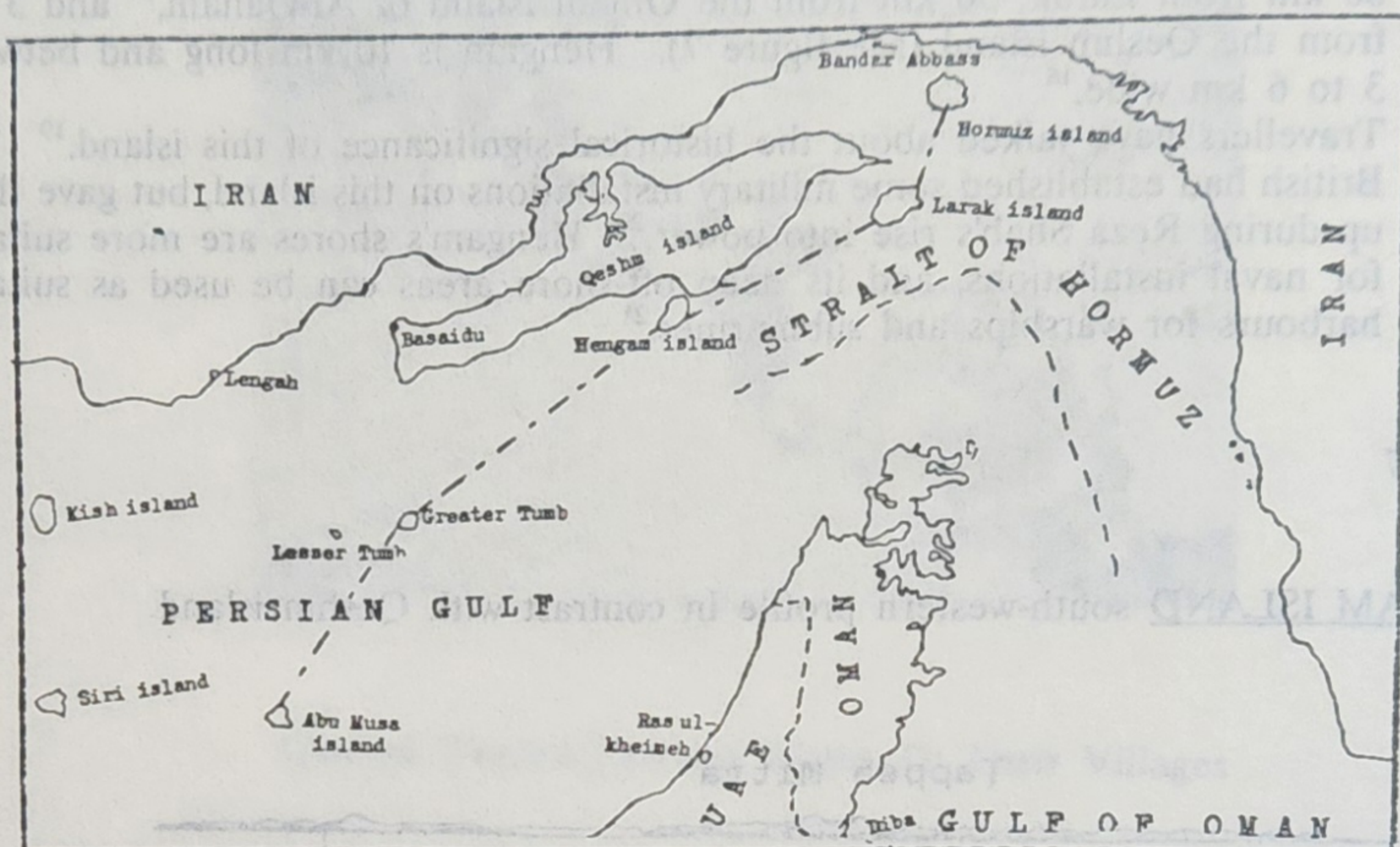
HENGAM ISLAND south-western profile in contrast with Qeshm island



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- ¹⁷ Rezmara, General Ali , op.cit
¹⁸ Nash'at, Sadeq, op. cit.,p.420
¹⁹ See, for example. Ibn Batutah, Rahelah, Cairo 1287
²⁰ Nash'at, Sadeq, op.cit., p.419
²¹ Razmara General, op.cit.

Figure 8

The Six Strategic Islands of the Curved Line In the Straits of Hormuz



5- Greater Tunb

31 km south-west of Qeshm, the island of Tunb is situated on the north of the Gulf's median line. This island's distance from the Iranian port of bandar Lengah is 50 km, and it is situated at more than 70 km from the Emirate of Ras ol-Khaimah.²² The term Tunb is Tangestani dialect (Southern Persian) which means "hill".

Since Tunb is located relatively far from the entrance of the Persian Gulf, its strategic value, individually, is far from being significant. But in the perceived Iranian strategic point of view, Tunb is highly valuable as it forms part of the Iranian defence line against the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz.

A few miles south-east of this island is situated the 35 metre-high rock island of Lesser Tunb. It is an uninhabitable island with some significance as a connection point secondary to the Greater Tunb in the perceived defence line at the entrance of the Gulf.

²² Kayhan International, May 30, 1970

Figure 9

GREATER TUNB

profile from 230° angle Lighthouse



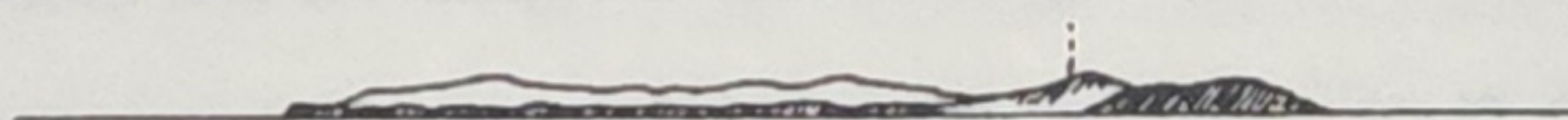
profile from 115° angle (distance 18 kilometres)



Figure 10

LESSER TUNB

profile from 169° (distance 10 kilometres)



6- Island of Abu-Musa

Abu-Musa is the Western most of the six islands forming the last point and most southern point of the curved defence line. It is located at 50 km east of Siri island (Iranian) and 67 km south of Bandar Lengeh.²³ The island is about 7 km long and 4.5 km wide. Iran maintains observation and other military posts on the island's strategic locations, while - according to the Iran-Sharjah agreement of November 1971 - Abu-Musa's inhabitants remain subjects of the Emirate of Sharjah.²⁴

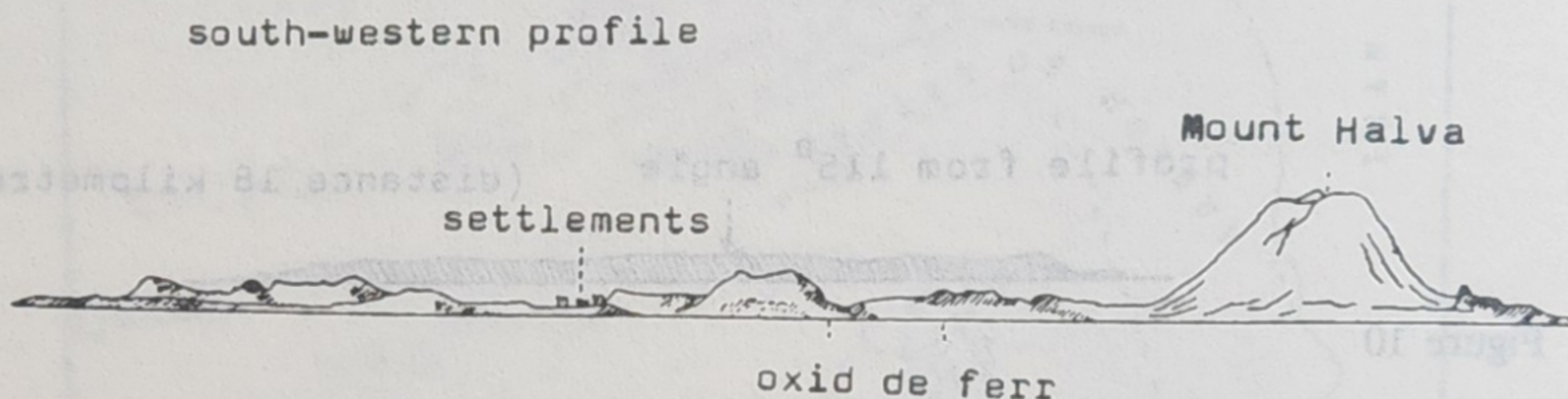
Iron ore mines are to be found on this island and about 100 years ago permissions were given to Haj Mo'in Bushehri for the exploitation of these minerals at Abu-Musa. The Qajar Shah is said to have received considerable sums of money for granting the permission to Bushehri.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ See; Relations of Imperial Government with the Countries in the Range of Responsibility of the Ninth Bureau, Foreign Ministry of Iran, 1976

Figure 11

ABU-MUSA ISLAND



General H. A. Razm-Ara 1341 (1962)

Abu-Musa is the Westernmost of the six islands forming the last point and most southern point of the curved defense line. It is located at 50 km east of Sir Bani Yas Island (Haram) and 17 km south of Bandar Lengeh. The island is about 7 km long and 4.5 km wide. It has numerous observation and other military posts on the island's strategic location. While according to the Iran-Sharjah agreement of November 1971, Abu-Musa's inhabitants remain subjects of the Emirate of Sharjah, from oil times are to be found on this island and about 100 years ago permission were given to the British for the exploitation of these minerals at Abu-Musa. The Qatar sheik is said to have received considerable sums of money for granting the permission to Bushair.

23 Ibid
24 See: Relations of Imperial Government with the Qatari in the Page of Responsibility of the Black British Foreign Ministry of Jan. 1976