

Book Review

The Atlas of Persian Gulf Maps: A Journey Through Time and History

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Persian Gulf: Atlas of Old & Historical Maps (3000 BC- 2000 AD), 2005, compiled by the Editorial Board (Mohammad Reza Sahab, Reza Nazarahari, et al), Center for Documents and Diplomatic History, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, Sobh-e Sadegh Publishing House, XXIV + 576 pages, Index to p. 580, Bibliography to p. 584.

The semi-closed body of water, an inland sea of a length of 989 kilometers and a size of some 251,000 km², lying to the south of the Iranian plateau, connected in the eastern end to the Gulf of Oman by the Strait of Hormuz; and marked in the western end by the major river delta of the Shatt al-Arab⁽¹⁾, which carries the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris, is the Persian Gulf.⁽²⁾ For a host of historical reasons – beyond the purview of this brief essay – the Persian Gulf, as a water channel, appears to have been found of particular interest to geologists, archaeologists, geographers, merchants, excursionists, scholars, and politicians,⁽³⁾ both in the distant and recent past, and of course, presently. While historians can

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continue their scholarly interest and work on the reasons for the significance of the water channel in the past, all the way from antiquity to modern times, the reasons for its critical importance, at least throughout the 20th century and up to the present time and certainly in the foreseeable future, both to the countries sharing coastline with it as well as supra-regional countries and powers with interests of their own, is related to the huge oil and gas reserves in the area⁽⁴⁾ and the regional and international geo-political and geo-strategic significance associated with and emanating from this very unique feature. Since it is expected that the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf will continue to be a major source of energy throughout the third millennium, the area will most probably continue to preserve its critical significance, both to the energy-producing-exporting countries in the region and to energy-importing countries across the world, with all the associated political, economic, security-strategic, and even military, implications – as has been the case during the past several decades.

The very fact that Iran – the Iranian plateau, to be more precise – has shared the largest coastline with the Persian Gulf since time immemorial, and the country, with the longest historical precedent as an organized state in the area, has had to deal with the waterway, in one form or another, throughout known history, does in fact point to a particular, intimate relationship. It is a fact of history that the Persian Gulf has constituted an inalienable part of the Iranian historical identity⁽⁵⁾ and its national interests, and played a significant and ever-increasing role in the Iranian state's foreign relations, cultural interactions with others in the area and beyond, and in more recent decades, in Iran's national economy.

The *Atlas of Old and Historical Maps*, a two-volume work covering a 5000-year period, is an attempt to document the history of the Persian Gulf through compilation of about 300 images of maps belonging to famous geographers and cartographers. Acting on an initial suggestion by the Foreign Ministry in early 2000, the Center for Documents and Diplomatic History undertook to prepare and compile the Atlas, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of academics and experts in the fields of history, geography and cartography at the national level. The collective endeavor, under the overall direction of Sahab Foundation of Cartography (a highly-respected national organization) and the actual supervision of an editorial board, took almost 5 years to select maps from among



2300 records and documents and compile the Atlas.

The Atlas contains the old and historical maps of the following four main periods, each prefaced with an introduction to the most famous cartographers of the period:

1. Antiquity
2. The Islamic Era and the Middle Ages
3. The Renaissance
4. The Modern Era

1. Antiquity (since 3000 B.C.)

The period covers maps of the Persian Gulf as well as those of the eastern hemisphere from 3000 B.C. to the 8th century A.D. The most notable map of this period is the oldest geographical map of the world in the form of a Babylonian clay tablet belonging to third millennium B.C. It is the earliest known map, found at a place near Kirkuk (present Iraq) from the dynasty of Sargor of Akkad. The original tablet is now preserved in the British Museum. All geographers and cartographers of fame during this period – 25 of which have been covered in this section of the Atlas, including Thules of Mellitus (546-640 B.C.) and Claudius Ptolemy (87-150 A.D.), have all used the name *Sinus Persicus* or other variants for the Persian Gulf in this period. Furthermore, as documented in all historical sources on antiquity and the Persian history, as far back as 550 B.C, when Darius the Great established the first Achaemenian Dynasty as the first Persian Empire in Pars (*Persis*, or modern *Fars*) in the southern part of the Iranian plateau, and subsequently in the Greek sources⁽⁶⁾, the body of water bordering the Iranian province came to be known as the Persian Gulf, also referred to during the epoch as "Jam Sea", "Iran Sea", "Pars Sea."⁽⁷⁾

2. The Islamic Period and the Middle Ages (8-15th Century A.D.)

The earliest available atlases belonging to this period are translations of Ptolemy's Atlas into Arabic. However, the first known atlas of the world prepared by Muslim geographers is known as *Surat al-Mamuniyeh* or the Map of al-Mamun, the Abbasid Caliph. This map was drawn by geographers and scholars of the period, who added new information on the expanded borders of the Islamic Empire. It is believed that this map was prepared in 833 A.D. under the direction of *Abu Musa*



Khwarezmi (780-849 A.D.), the famous Persian mathematician. The map illustrates Asia, Europe and North Africa. Different versions of this map along with a complete version by *Jbn Fadlallah al-Urnari* (d. 1349 A.D.), *Masalik al-Absar*, are preserved at the Topkapi Sarayi Library in Istanbul.

From among the famous mathematicians, geographers and cartographers of this period, al-Kindi⁽⁸⁾ (801-873 A.D.), Ibn Khordazbeh (820-913 A.D.), al-Batani⁽⁹⁾ (850-929 A.D.), and al-Mas'oudi⁽¹⁰⁾ (897-964 A.D.) stand out, all of whom have used the term *Bahr al-Fars* (Persian Sea) in their maps. It should be added, however, that after ibn Howqal [931-988 A. D.] the limits of the Persian Sea gradually changed in the works of cartographers and geographers, sections of which became known as the Indian Sea and the Red Sea (Arabian Sea), as separate seas, and gradually a more precise limit of the Persian Sea took shape, so much so that in 966 A.D. the name *al-Khalij al-Faresi* [Persian Gulf] appeared, for the first time, in Tahir al-Maqdesi's works.

3. The Renaissance (16-18th Century A.D.)

From the 16th century onward a significant advance has been noticed in European cartography, which has been attributed mainly to the translation by Europeans of the works by Muslim scholars. This allowed them to use the atlases prepared by Ptolemy and other earlier geographers. New knowledge in mathematics and the science of cartography further advanced the field. This period can well be called the age of European advancement in cartography which also coincided with a corresponding decline in the contribution of Muslim scholars to the field. Following the Middle Ages, the acceptance of a spherical earth and the discovery of the New World led cartographers to create various map projections. The cumulative result of their efforts formed the basis for maps and atlases in common usage today, albeit with greater accuracy and precision. The Atals under review enumerates about 50 famous cartographers of this period. A notable geographer of this time was Aaron Arrowsmith (1750-1833 A.D.), the cartographer and hydrograph of the Prince of Wales, Who in 1813, with the help of Captain Ritchie and Lieutenant Bartholomew R.B., charted a relatively advanced map of the Persian Gulf, entitled *Chart of the Persian Gulph from Original Materials*.



4. The Modern Era (19-20th Century A.D.)

The past two centuries have produced special maps of the Persian Gulf containing accurate information on the ports, islands, jetties and hydrography of the region. In addition to governments, companies and agencies have also taken part in the preparation and publication of maps of the various regions of the world, which are readily available. In 1830s the cartographic section of the British Admiralty, established in 1795, published a collection of 86 large and precise hydrographic maps which had been prepared between 1828 and 1832 by Captain James Horsburgh (1762-1836), who was the cartographer as well as the publisher of the East India Company. This collection, which is now available in the Public Record Office (PRO) in London, was published in 4 volumes by the Archive Edition in 1990. The Maps of 12 most famous cartographers of this period are presented in this Atlas, all of which contain the name of the Persian Gulf instead of any other designation. Regarding the geographical institutions we may refer to the Royal Geographic Society (1830), Orr & Dower (19th century), Tallis & Co. (1838-1851), John Bartholomew & Sons (since 1860) and Johnson & Ward Publishers (1860-1885), etc. Development and extension of international trade and sailing further assisted the charting and publication of naval maps and caused a significant improvement in navigation and ocean travel. Production of maps containing precise information for military and civilian use was significantly improved in the aftermath of the first and second World Wars, first by the British, and later by the American Navy. A common feature among all the maps produced during the period has been to refer to the waterway between Persia (Iran) and the Arabian Peninsula as the "Persian Gulf."

In fact, as the Atlas shows very clearly the historical name of the water channel in question had never been a matter of dispute – even doubt – among cartographers and historians. Even Western colonial powers, starting with the Portuguese (as of early 16th century) and later the British (as of late 18th century), who came to the Persian Gulf and established dominion over the area until the latter's direct presence came to a close in December 1971, never tampered with the historical name of the Persian Gulf - notwithstanding their on and off political and even military disputes with the Iranian state.⁽¹¹⁾ Curiously enough, it is only since the



1958 Ba'athist coup in Iraq leading to the overthrow of monarchy and the establishment of republic⁽¹²⁾, and the ensuing political contention and hostility between the radical Iraqi republic and the conservative Persian monarchy that two new variations [al-khalij and al-khalij al-Arabi – “Gulf” and “Arabian Gulf”] for the name of the Persian Gulf found their way into the political-propaganda literature in the Arab sheikhdoms and emirates of the Persian Gulf, and subsequently in the bigger part of the Arab world. The open political dispute between the Shah of Iran and Egypt's Nasser in 1962 over their respective support for the contending factions in Yemen [monarchists versus republicans] gave further impetus to the Ba'athist political ploy and the fictitious term was “used with greater frequency as a weapon in the psychological war with Iran for political influence in the Persian Gulf.”⁽¹³⁾ It should be of interest, though, that only a few years earlier in the 1950s Jamal Abdel Nasser had started his nationalist campaign towards uniting the Arab world around the central slogan of “From the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Notwithstanding the rather extensive and well-lubricated efforts at different levels during the past five decades, especially since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the inevitable heightened tension between Iran and the Arab states in the Persian Gulf – and in a larger sense, the Arab world – more specifically during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the fictitious name has not found much acceptance outside of the Arab world, nor is it recognized by the United Nations or any other international organization. The United Nations Secretariat has on many occasions has requested that only "Persian Gulf" be used as the official and standard geographical designation for the body of water.⁽¹⁵⁾ The twenty-third session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (28 March – 4 April 2006) confirmed, once again, the name "Persian Gulf" as the legitimate and official term to be used by members of the United Nations.⁽¹⁶⁾

Since I have been directly engaged in the preparation and publication of the Atlas of the Old and Historical Maps of the Persian Gulf, in all its stages, including in the drafting of the Preface to the Atlas – on which I have drawn in this short essay, among other sources - I am quite familiar with the invaluable collective work and effort that has gone into this project. Apart from being a career diplomat – with all its requirements and implications – I tend to look at the question of the Persian



Gulf, inclusive of issues pertaining to its long-established historical name, more in my personal capacity as a student of Iranian history. I believe this initial step needs to be complemented with further work on maps and also solid analytical research in the history of the Persian Gulf. The waterway's increasingly critical importance for Iran – both as a country and as a state – now more than ever before, will make it more and more imperative for Iranians across the board, including both the public sector and the civil society in its broad sense, to pay due attention to all aspects related to the Persian Gulf, inclusive in particular of its historical name, as a matter of inalienable, strategic national interest.

Notes

1. The common waterway between Iran and Iraq has been commonly called Arvand Rud in Iran. The 1975 Treaty of State Boundaries and Neighborly Relations between Iran and Iraq, an internationally recognized legal document, has used the term Shatt al-Arab in referring to the waterway.
2. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, accessed on 3 October 2010.
3. Sir Arnold T. Wilson, "The Persian Gulf", (London: 1928), p. 3.
4. Existing data indicate that the Persian Gulf holds the largest known oil reserves of the world. It is estimated to have 650 billion barrels of oil from the total estimated world reserves of 991 billion barrels - approximately 65% of total. In addition, the Persian Gulf area is also estimated to have 31 trillion cubic ft. of natural gas, or about 30% of the world's natural gas.
5. As underlined by Arnold Wilson, the British resident director in the area in the 1920s and early 30s, "the Persian Gulf has enjoyed an Iranian Identity since at least 2200 years ago." Op.Cit. p. 3.
6. "Some of the Greek writers also called it "Persikonkaitas", meaning the Persian Gulf. Claudius Ptolemaeus, the celebrated Greco-Egyptian mathematician/astronomer in the second century called it "Persicus Sinus" or Persian Gulf. In the first century A.D., Quintus Curtius Rufus, the Roman historian, designated it "Aquarius Persico" – the Persian Sea. Flavius Arrianus, another Greek historian, called it "Persiconkaitas" (Persian Gulf)." Wikipedia, Op. Cit.
7. Ibid.
8. Abu Yusef Yaqeb ibn Is'haq al-Sabbah
9. Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Jabbar al-Harrani
10. Abul Hasan Ali bin al-Husain bin Ali
11. The consistent use – without any exception – of the term "Persian Gulf" in the official correspondence as well as public pronouncements of the British Government throughout the period of their colonial involvement in the area attests to this practice. See, for example, the political-diplomatic correspondence of the British Residency in the Persian Gulf, including those of Sir Arnold Wilson, political officer and resident director in the Persian Gulf (1920-1932).
12. "There is no evidence of the Persian Gulf ever being referred to as the 'Arabian Gulf'



prior to 1958. In that year Baghdad (Iraq) radiocoined and used this term as part of its anti-Iranian propaganda campaign.” Guive Mirfenederski, *The Tamb Islans Controversy: 1887-1971; A case Study in Claims to Territory in International Law* (PhD Dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, May 1985), p. 2

13. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

14. “Min al Bahr-el Atlasi ila Khalij-el Faresi”

15. Wikipedia, *Op. Cit.*

16. Working Paper 61, p. 2.