



BAHRAIN I. GEOGRAPHY

i. Geography

Several interpretations of the name Bahrain, both popular and learned, have been put forward. The most probable (Oestrup) explains it by the presence of the promontory and archipelago extending eastward from the mainland in the direction of the Qaṭar peninsula, which divide into two parts the waters in this section of the upper Persian Gulf. The name now refers exclusively to the archipelago (composed of thirty-six islands, with a total area of 622 km²) and to the independent state located there, or sometimes only to its largest island, formerly called Owāl or Awāl, popularly Samak (the fish), which extends almost 40 km from north to south and 15 km from west to east at its widest points. The other important islands are Moḥarraḡ, Nabīh Şāleḡ, and Setra northeast of the main island; Ḥawār to the southeast; and Omm Na'sān to the west. The north-south axis passing through the main island coincides with a massive anticlinal dome of Jurassic and Cretaceous limestones that belongs to the family of marginal folds along the northeastern edge of the Arabian plateau. Carved out in the center by relief inversion, it reaches its highest point in the crest of the Jabal Doḡān, at an altitude of 124 meters.

Bahrain possesses a desert climate. Precipitation (annual mean: 95 mm), which falls only between January and May, is carried by rare cyclonic lows originating in the Mediterranean and penetrating as far as the Persian Gulf and is completely inadequate to support a rural population. But the island, like the northeastern coast of the mainland, possesses an important underground aquifer originating in the heights of central Arabia, which gushes forth here in



large springs, in the form of natural artesian wells (some of them under the sea bed) along the entire northern perimeter of the main island. The aquifer can also be tapped along the full length of this coast by means of very shallow wells (the water level has, however, dropped recently because of overexploitation). In the interior of the island underground drainage channels funnel the waters from the piedmont.

Irrigation crops of cereals, fruits, and legumes, sheltered by date palms, are thus widespread along the entire northern periphery of the island.

It is not surprising then that this site, so favorable for human habitation and located halfway between the head of the Persian Gulf and the straits of Hormoz (Hormuz), played an important role in the trade and life of the Gulf at a very early period. The island's freshwater resources made it a valuable provisioning station for ships. It has been demonstrated that Bahrain must be identified with the Dilmun of the Assyro-Babylonian texts, an important staging point in the maritime commerce between Mesopotamia and the cities of the Indus during the third and second millennia b.c., and with Tylos of the Classical Latin and Greek texts (see the history and survey of this subject in Bibby). In the Islamic Middle Ages there was already an important city located on the site of present-day Manāma, a busy center of transit trade and the hub of pearl fishing in the entire gulf (Edrīsī, tr. Jaubert, I, pp. 372-73; Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, II, p. 246). This maritime activity reached its peak at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time Bahrain possessed about 1,500 ships in its own right and served as the embarkation point for 3,000-4,000 ships a year; it was a center of pearl fishing and trade and was visited especially by numerous Indian merchants. The decline began, however, after World War I, owing to competition from Japanese cultured pearls. There were 400 pearl-fishing boats in Bahrain in about 1930, 250 still on the eve of World War II, but only 150 in 1946. Today there is hardly anything more than a small shrimp-fishing industry (Fougerouse, pp. 100-01).

A new economic phase began with the discovery in 1932 of a petroleum field in the center of the island, which was brought into production in 1934. Production of crude oil, topping 1 million tons a year after 1935 and stabilized at about 1.5 million tons between 1948 and 1956, steadily increased thereafter to a maximum of 3.8 million tons in 1970. A large refinery (present capacity: 13 million tons), established in the northeastern part of the island near Setra, processes, in addition to the crude from Bahrain, oil coming from Saudi Arabia by underwater pipeline. On the other hand, between the island and the



mainland there is an offshore oil field the production from which is managed by Saudi Arabia, though the revenues are divided between it and Bahrain. Finally, a rich field of natural gas, in two superimposed strata, the reserves of which are estimated at 150 billion m³, has been under exploitation since the end of the 1970s at a rate of 4.5 billion m³ a year. Downstream from the petroleum refinery a petrochemical complex has been constructed and operating since 1985, producing ammonia and methanol. Plans for an important new refinery that would process heavy crude oil from Saudi Arabia into light petroleum products at the rate of 80,000 barrels a day are also underway.

Local oil production has, however, declined since 1972. In 1980 it amounted to only 2.8 million tons, and the oil field will doubtless be exhausted by 1995. So Bahrain is currently orienting its economy more and more toward a broadly diversified industry, based for the present on local gas and in the future on the important gas resources of the neighboring region. A large aluminum smelting plant (capacity 165,000 tons a year) processes ore coming from Australia. An aluminum rolling mill was opened in 1984, and three other factories make finished products. A factory for the initial smelting of iron ore (capacity 4 million tons annually) has just opened on an artificial island east of the port of Manāma. Four desalination plants furnish the water necessary for these installations and for the population, for whose needs the natural springs are now quite insufficient. Extensive shipyards for repair and overhaul, the most important in the Persian Gulf, were opened in 1977, also on an artificial island. In addition, there are a cement plant and numerous small industries of various kinds. Finally, in its post-petroleum phase Bahrain is coming to function as a sort of service center for the entire gulf. It has become a hub of international communications and telecommunications; a very busy commercial arena for “exempt” multinational companies; and finally—and most important—a world banking center, with 178 “offshore” establishments in 1983, serving the entire international community and especially Saudi Arabia, playing a role comparable to that of Beirut before the Lebanese civil war and benefiting from the decline of the latter city.

All this activity has attracted to Bahrain a considerable foreign population, especially during the fifteen years that followed the declaration of independence in 1971. The indigenous population, which in 1941 comprised 90,000 inhabitants, of whom 16,000 were foreigners, and in 1971 216,000 people, of whom 38,000 were foreigners, had reached, by the time of the 1981



census, 350,000 people, of whom 112,000 (32 percent) were foreigners. The foreign population had thus tripled in ten years. This foreign population provided most of the labor force: 81,000 (74,000 men and 7,000 women) compared to 64,000 working persons (57,000 men and 7,000 women) of Bahraini nationality. Four-fifths of this foreign population (87,000 people) consisted of non-Arab Asians, especially Indians and Pakistanis (in domestic employment and other service occupations), Thais, South Koreans, and Filipinos (in construction and industrial jobs). Bahrain also counted a European and North American colony of more than 5,000 people. Iranians are numerous (certainly several thousand) but are not distinguished in the census, so that their exact number is unknown. The capital, Manāma, on the northeastern side of the main island, and the port of Moḥarraḡ, on a small neighboring island linked to the capital by a causeway, contain the majority of the population.