



# MOĠĀN

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**MOĠĀN** (or Dašt-e Moġān, also Muġān), a lowland steppe in Azarbaijan.

*i. Physical geography.*

*ii. History, population, economy.*

*iii. Archaeology (pending).*

## i. Physical Geography

The name “Moġān” designates an extensive plain west of the Caspian sea, in the historical region of Azarbaijan, divided since the Treaty of Torkmānčāy between Persia and Russia (followed by the Soviet Union and then the Republic of Azarbaijan). The Persian sector fell within the province of East Azarbaijan until 1993, after which it comprised the northern part of Ardabil Province. Factors like relief, soil, vegetation, and hydrology put its southern limits along the *Ḳoruzlu Daġ*, an anticline of approximately 700 m above mean sea level. The plain is delineated by the *Qarasu* in the west and by the *Aras*, the Persian border, and the *Balharu* stream in the north and east. The center of Persian Moġān is an extremely fertile stretch of land, extending 25-30 km parallel to the southern rim of the *Aras* River.

Geologically as well as geomorphologically, the Dašt-e Moġān is located within a syncline, which has been filled up with erosion material from the tertiary mountain systems to the south. North of the *Ḳoruzlu Dāġ*, the surface of Moġān consists of more or less undisturbed strata of Neogen deposits, which, towards



the north, are covered by quarternary deposits. They are nothing else but fluvio-lacustrine sediments of glacial and post-glacial stages of the [Caspian Sea](#), which covered large tracts of the Kor-Aras valley in the Pleistocene Epoch. Gently rolling to almost flat surfaces are characteristics of the core area of Moġān, facilitating the development of irrigation schemes in recent times as well as at many previous periods.

The climate is favorable for agriculture and animal husbandry. Annual temperatures show the “maritime” influence of the Caspian Sea. Comparatively mild winters with an average 3-5 C temperature for January as the coldest month coincide with only occasional frosts and comparatively little snowfall. Summers, however, can be hot: a July average of 26 to 28 C is common, thus indicating an overall continental temperature regime. Continentality is also true for the annual precipitation. In contrast to nearby Caspian observations (e.g., Āstārā with above 1,000 mm annual precipitation), stations in Moġān do not receive more than 300 mm in an average year.

Geology and climate have decisively contributed to the steppe-like character of Moġān. In terms of pedology (soil science), brown steppe-soils (see Dewan and Famouri, map) predominate. They are, at the same time, a response to the natural vegetation cover, which has been a kind of short-grass steppe. Its floral components include typical grass species such as *Poa*, *Stipa*, and *Bromus*; on the other hand *Astragalus* or *Artemisia* species indicate both unfavorable ecological conditions and selective adjustments of vegetation to the influences of long pastoral use. For centuries, Moġān has served as grazing area for nomadic tribes (see below ii) with agriculture being of secondary importance.

Despite the Persian designation “Dašt-e Moġān,” the climate, vegetation cover, plant, and animal life as well as human occupation of this environment show very clearly that this region is not a *dašt* in the strict meaning of the word. Nevertheless, before the steppe was irrigated and populated, for much of the summer it was a proper *dašt*, i.e., steppe—parched and apparently barren.

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(Günther Schweizer with emendations by Richard Tapper)

### ii. History, Population, Economy

Definition of Moġān's boundaries has varied. Most narrowly, it is the area in the bow of the Aras and lower Kor rivers as far as the Caspian, mostly falling within the present Republic of Azarbaijan. Sometimes it is held to extend westwards beyond the mouth of the Darayort (Qarasu) as far as Ḳodā Āfarin; and southwards beyond the Ḳoruzlu highlands to include the Ṣalavāt and Ṭāleš ranges.

The southeastern Caucasus has always offered a highly favorable environment for both pastoral and agricultural activities. High mountains, with abundant summer pasturages, command the vast and fertile Širvān (see [Šervān](#)), Qarabāġ (Mil), and Moġān plains, which provide correspondingly extensive winter grazing. The plains also invite the construction of large-scale irrigation works.

The plains were a favorite wintering place of conquerors, while not surprisingly the whole area has been disputed by powerful states. It is a natural crossroads, and trade between Russia and Persia and between Anatolia and Central Asia passed through or close by. From Safavid times, travelers and merchants from Europe commonly journeyed overland through Russia, took ship on the Caspian, landed at Širvān, stayed briefly at the growing trading centre of Šamāḳı, then crossed the Kor at the Javāt bridge to pass via Moġān and [Ardabil](#) into central Persia, and beyond to India (for these travelers, see Tapper 1997, henceforth FNI, passim).



Before Safavid times, the population of Moġān was probably a mixture, or an alternation, of Kurdish, Turkic, Mongol, and other elements. Kurdish groups, and others speaking Iranian languages, were autochthonous, while the Turks and Mongols were comparative newcomers. When the Mongols arrived, in 1220-21 their generals Jebe and Subutay wintered in Moġān before ravaging Georgia and the rest of Azarbaijan, driving out the Turks. After Timur conquered Azarbaijan in 1386, he liked to winter in Qarabāġ and Moġān. Uzun Ḥasan in 1469 defeated the Timurid forces in battle in Moġān. [Esma'īl I](#) Ṣafavigathered his Qizilbāš (Kızılbaş, Qezelbāš) supporters in Moġān in 1499 for the expedition to Qarabāġ, the Caucasus, and Anatolia that swept him a year later to the throne of Azarbaijan. From the late fourteenth to the end of the fifteenth century, the chiefs of the Čakerlu tribe headed their own emirate in Moġān; at the time of Esma'īl's rise, Sultan 'Ali Beg Čakerlu was governor of Ardabil and Moġān (FNI, pp. 76-77).

In Safavid Persia, Moġān was at times part of Azarbaijan province. It contained no large town but straddled the Šīrvān-Ardabil road and included not only rich pastures, but also fertile agricultural lands—important and productive resources that would have attracted the interest of both tribal chiefs and provincial administrators and landowners. During the sixteenth century Moġān was governed by Qizilbāš chiefs from various tribal groups, with presumably numerous pastoral followers in the vicinity. Some were from the large, composite Šāmlu confederacy. Under [Shah Ṭahmāsp I](#), Ġazi Khan of Tekelu/Takleh, another major Qizilbāš group, “was given as assignment (*toyul*) the territories (*olka*) of Sālyān and Maḥmudābād, among the districts of Šīrvān” (Rumlu, I, pp. 295-96). These were farming communities along the lower Kor, probably including the steppe pastures as well as the *anhār-e Moġān*—lands irrigated by an ancient canal system restored by Timur in 1401; but some of the latter were *awqāf* of the Ardabil shrine (Fragner, pp. 187-88).

The Ottomans occupied Šīrvān in 1579 and much of Azarbaijan in 1585. By the treaty of 1591-92, Moġān and Ṭaleš were left in Persian control and administered from Ardabil (Röhrborn, p. 7). This was now a politically sensitive frontier region, particularly as it contained the Safavid shrines, though it was probably also by 1600 in a state of considerable desolation.

[Shah 'Abbās I](#) recovered Azarbaijan in 1603-04 and Šīrvān in 1607, and once again peopled the area with loyal tribes, some of which later became known as Šāhsevan (see [Shahsevan](#)). Moġān ceased to be a frontier region and enjoyed a century of comparative tranquility. Olearius (pp. 177-80) in 1637-38 noted that

the Ardabil shrine collected rent from local Turkish and Arab nomads using the rich Moġān grazing lands, though the nomads he observed in Moġān were poor. Later, Moġān was among the Azarbaijan districts entrusted to the *sepahsālār*, immediate military subordinate of the *qorčibāši*, who was chief of all the tribes of Iran (Dānešpažuh, p. 80).

Meanwhile, nomads may have been settling in Moġān. Timur's canals may still have been operating, and in 1700 the local khan had a new canal from the Aras constructed (De Bruin, IV, p. 12; this was presumably 'Abbāsqli Khan, *hākem* of Moġān and Lankarān (Lenkoran) in 1703; Schimkoreit, p. 368). By 1725 the *anhār* (irrigation canals) of Moġān must have been considerable, judging from the revenue assessment (Minorsky, 1943, p. 165). Much of the Moġān, Širvān, and Qarabāġ steppes was irrigated at least until 1733, but the canals were probably destroyed finally by Nāder Shah a few years later—Monteith observed their remains in 1831 (Lerch, pp. 18-20; Monteith, p. 30; see also Minorsky, 1936). Traces of them, somewhat dwarfing modern irrigation schemes, could still be observed in Persian Moġān in 1966, as could massive ruins of medieval cities that must have thrived on them (see section iii, below). Ironically, Nāder Shah is remembered locally not as their destroyer but as their builder, one large canal being called Nadır-Arķı after him.

In 1717 the inhabitants of Moġān revolted against their khan, a Persian noble imposed by the shah, chose their own *kalāntar*, and fought the troops sent against them. The leader is not named, but may be Maṣūr Khan Moġāni, Safavid governor-general of Mašhad, who was defeated by the Abdāli Afghans, dismissed from his post in 1716, and returned to Azarbaijan, where he was involved in disturbances and executed in 1734 (Zevakin, p. 13, quoted by Abdurakhmanov, p. 17; Mohammad Kažem, fol. 16a).

In the 1720s, for several crucial years Moġān was the frontier between the Russian, Ottoman, and Safavid empires, and the population was thrust into a political role for which they must have been ill-prepared. By the 1724 Russo-Ottoman Treaty, the frontier between them bisected Širvān and Moġān. From Javāt in Moġān, the Turko-Iranian frontier was to run south towards Ardabil, which was left to Shah Ṭahmāsp, and then straight to Hamadān. The Russians were to retain control of the Caspian provinces they had already won. With the death of Peter the Great, the Ottomans in 1725 took Ardabil, forcing Ṭahmāsp, who had taken refuge there from the Afghans in Isfahan, to retreat to Qazvin (FNI, chapter 5).



The Russians entrusted their territories in Sālyān and Moġān to ‘Aliqoli Khan Šāhsevan. The Ottomans also appointed a governor, Şafiqoli Khan, to their sector of Moġān (Čelebizāda, fols. 83b-85b; but see Fragner, p. 205). Between 1726 and 1728 most local tribes, especially the Šāhsevan and the Šaqāqi, with Russian support, fought a guerrilla resistance against the Ottomans, trying especially to drive them from Ardabil. In early 1729 Ottoman forces finally defeated them in Moġān; the Ināllu and Afšār Šāhsevan and the Šaqāqi of Meškin surrendered, but Moġānlu and the other Šāhsevan took refuge with the Russians near Sālyān. According to Major Gärber, Russian Commissar for frontier demarcation, in 1728 Šāhsevan and Moġānlu nomads rented winter grazing in the Sālyān district, whose excellent pastures were due to the annual summer flooding in the Kor delta. Their horses were the finest in Iran (Gärber, pp. 137-39, 146-47).

Meanwhile, Persian fortunes turned under Ṭahmāsp-qoli Afšār, later [Nāder Shah](#). By the Treaty of Rašt in 1732, Russia ceded the Caspian provinces south of the Kor, including Moġān. In the winter of 1734-35 Nāder marched through Ardabil to Moġān and Širvān, and by October 1735 he had recovered the Caucasian districts. In January 1736 he camped in Moġān near the Javāt bridge, where he held his famous *qurultay* assembly of the chiefs, mullahs, and nobles of the newly re-conquered Persian empire, and where they duly elected him their ruler (eyewitness accounts of the *qurultay* include: Abraham, pp. 282-310; Astārābādi, pp. 266-67; Moḡammad Hāšem, pp. 203-04; Moḡammad Kāzem, II, fol. 1f.).

In the last years of Nāder’s reign, Moġān suffered from his campaigns, depredations, and depopulation. Travelers of the time enthused over the rich pastures, where the royal horses were said to be raised, but noted that they were virtually deserted, as were nearby villages. After his death in 1747, Moġān and its tribal population, under ‘Aliqoli Khan Šāhsevan’s descendants, had important roles in the complex play of alliance, opposition and intrigue that characterized the Azarbaijan and Trans-Araxian khanates until the end of the century. Moġān was mostly under the khan of Javāt; the southwestern portion, the present Persian Moġān, was under the khan of Ardabil (Butkov, I, pp. 253-54; Abdullaev 1958, pp. 52, 160; idem, 1965, p. 231; see Abdullaev 1958, p. 58; idem, 1965, pp. 124f., 229f. on the economic importance of Moġān).

In early 1796 Āġā Moḡammad Khan Qajar re-established control over the former Safavid Trans-Araxian dependencies, and in his turn was crowned shah in the plains of Moġān. Later in the year a Russian army sent by

Catherine the Great appeared in Moġān, though it withdrew on her death the same winter. Russian forces resumed the conquest of the southeastern Caucasus in 1804, engaging Faṭḥ ‘Ali Shah’s armies in a war that ended with the battle of Aslanduz (1812), fought on the western edge of Moġān. By the [Golestān Treaty](#) (1813) Ṭāleš and the better part of Moġān became Russian possessions. In the second Russian war (1826-28) many engagements were fought in or near Moġān; the concluding Treaty of Torkmānčāy confirmed the Persian losses (FNI, chapter 8).

Contemporary travelers comment on the virtues of the Moġān steppe pastures (Kinneir, p. 153; Porter, II, pp. 512-13; Monteith, p. 30). Šāhsevan nomads were allowed to continue using a restricted area of these pastures, but the Šīrvān sector, comprising territory on the southern banks of the Aras and Kor rivers, was reserved for the use of Russian nomads and village-based flocks (Markov, p. 23).

Russian colonization of Moġān proceeded, but agricultural efforts suffered from raiding by the Šāhsevan (Rostopchin, p. 98). Soon the whole steppe was abandoned to the nomads in winter, and on the southern banks of the Kor and Aras there was continual bloodshed (FNI, chapter 10).

Most of Persian Moġān belonged to Ojārud district, part of Namin khanate in Ardabil sub-province; only southwestern Moġān was in the Angut khanate, part of the Qaradāġ sub-province. The whole area was directly administered by the governor of Ardabil through the Šāhsevan chiefs. Continuing Šāhsevan disorder in Moġān was used by both Iran and Russia to political advantage, and was an important factor in Great Power rivalry in Iran. In response to Russian complaints the Iranian authorities in 1839 created the offices of *elbeġi* for the two sections (Meškin and Ardabil) of the Moġān Šāhsevan tribes. Various important Iranian officials attempted to exercise control in Moġān, for example in 1843, and again in 1860, but in 1884 the Russians took the planned and inevitable step of closing the Moġān frontier to the Šāhsevan (NFI, pp. 209 ff.).

L. K. Artamonov and L. F. Tigranov testify eloquently to the effects of the frontier closure, particularly on the peasants and nomads on the Persian side. Persian Moġān was *kāleša* (see [KĀṢṢA](#)), and the right to cultivate the pastures had to be acquired from the Crown. Towards 1900 parts of Moġān, like large areas of *kāleša* elsewhere, were transferred to Šāhsevan chiefs specifically for cultivation, as recorded in extant *farmāns*. One such document seen by the



author was issued in 1892 to ‘Aliqoli Khan *elbeġi* and some associates, who were assigned fields or hamlets (*mazra‘a*) in Moġān as private property for cultivation and settlement, on condition they paid the taxes assessed—though few of the lands mentioned were turned to the plow for another fifty years. The rest of Moġān remained as grazing, divided into 364 pastures (*qešlaq*); *Tigranov details the location of many of the tribes in 1903. For some years the governor of Ardabil annually redistributed these pastures among the tribes (NFI, pp. 224-32).*

In spring 1908, border clashes at Demān and Belasovār in the east of Moġān gave the Russians a pretext for military intervention in Azarbaijan on a scale that hastened the fall of the Constitutionalist government in Tehran (FNI, pp. 252 ff.). Between 1909 and 1921 Šāhsevan warriors fought numerous engagements in Moġān, usually inconclusively, with both Iranian government troops and Russian Cossacks. In winters after 1916, some nomads returned to Russian Moġān, occupied the banks of the Kor, and prevented settlers from irrigating their crops. In spring 1921, a Bolshevik column invaded Moġān and was wiped out by Šāhsevan warriors, supported by Musavatist refugees (NFI, pp. 380-83).

In the 1930s, like other nomads in the country, the Šāhsevan were forcibly sedentarized. In Moġān, many settled in villages that were already scattered along the narrow but fertile Aras banks; settlement within the steppe was not feasible without water supplies. Nomads from Ṭālešmika’illu and other tribes commenced dry farming near the old villages Belasovār and Babaškandi, founding the new settlements Orufkandi and Polatlu-Quyusu. French experts, employed in 1935 to survey Moġān’s irrigation potential, advised re-opening the ancient canal systems and constructing a dam at the mouth of the Darayort. These recommendations could not then be implemented, but attempts had already been made to dig out the old canal near Oltān, for the benefit of new Pirevatlu settlers there. Nomads from the Moġānlu, Ajirli, Beydili, Ja’farlu, and Balabeyli tribes now crowded the Aras banks; most of them had winter pastures nearby. In the Darayort valley Qojabeyli, Hajikojalu, Moġānlu and others settled (Tapper, 2003; NFI, pp. 288-94). As elsewhere, however, large numbers of nomads had resumed migrating with their tents and animals by the time of Reza Shah’s abdication in 1941, and continued to do so under the Soviet occupation (1941-46) and the subsequent short-lived Democrat government (FNI, pp. 294-98; ‘Aziz-zāda, pp. 323-60).

Throughout Reza Shah’s reign, and until 1963, owners of flocks grazing in

Moġān paid a specific sum per animal to the government as rent, though the nomads considered it to be a tax. In the later 1940s, with a series of poor harvests and harsh winters, the Persian government took serious measures to develop Moġān. 1948-49 was a particularly disastrous winter, and many Šāhsevan who had resumed their tents now abandoned them again, often settling in villages they had recently founded in Moġān. In 1949 some of Moġān was transferred to the new Plan Organization for development under the first Seven-Year Plan. Backed by commercial companies and assured of assistance from FAO and other bodies, the Šerkat-e Šiār-e Āzarbāyejān was formed and began mechanized dry farming near what became the settlement of Šāhābād (on pastures of the Ṭālešmika'illu, Takila, Sarvanlar, and Jelowdarlu tribes). Rainfall in eastern Moġān proved less than anticipated, and first results were unsatisfactory, so in 1951 Plan Organization directed the Company to commence irrigation by the Aras. Based at 'Alirezā-ābād, the Company had by 1953 completed a canal system irrigating some 4,000 hectares, in the pastures of Geyikli and Pirevatlu tribes. Construction then started of a larger network, to irrigate 28,000 hectares more, winter pastures of Ajirli, Ja'farli, Petili, Beydili, Gowašli, Homunlu, 'Arapli, Aivatlu, and Takila tribes.

In 1958 the Šiār Company handed the irrigation project for completion to an independent company, ODDM (Organisation du Développement du Dachte Moughan), but continued dry farming near Šāhābād and Belasovār. The main canal suffered heavy flood damage in spring 1962; next year chronic shortage of funds, lack of personnel, and deteriorating relations between ODDM and Plan Organization halted development in Moġān. In 1964, the scheme was transferred to the Azarbaijan Water and Power Authority. Two years later engineering works were complete and the lands distributed. Unfortunately, because of excessive silting and rapid lowering in the level of the Aras, the water available was sufficient to irrigate only 18,400 of the projected 32,400 hectares, but work started soon after on a new Irano-Soviet project to build two dams on the Aras, one at Aslanduz and one near Naḵjavān. Finished in 1972, the Aslanduz diversion dam irrigated the remaining 14,000 hectares of the original project (largely frontier lands ceded by the Soviet Union in 1957), and a further 40,000 hectares of Iranian Moġān; it would eventually provide power and other facilities for the whole region (ODDM; Hawaiian Agronomics; Schweizer 1974). The oil company drilled in southern and eastern Moġān in the 1960s, but apparently with unpromising results.



These development schemes meanwhile improved living conditions for both nomads and settlers in Moġān. Flocks were brought to watering places along the main canal; expert veterinary advice and treatment were available from the government livestock station near Šāhābād, where an experimental flock of Moġāni-Rambouillet crosses was successfully reared for some years. The Health Centre in Pārsābād, the Irrigation Project capital town, offered free treatment and cheap medicines. Communications with Meškinšahr, Ardabil and outside the region improved and increased in the 1960s, while bazaars at Pārsābād and Belasovār, and shops elsewhere in Moġān, provided unprecedented access to commodities throughout the winter. In the 1970s, however, as elsewhere in the country, conditions for nomads deteriorated drastically.

The revolution of 1978-79 was largely an urban phenomenon, in Moġān as elsewhere (‘Aziz-zāda, pp. 391-98). Šāhsevan nomads themselves played little part, but settled tribespeople participated in events in towns such as Pārsābād, Belasovar, and Germi, and in strikes at the Agro-Industry Company in Moġān. Since the revolution, while pastoralism has been fostered, settlement of Šāhsevan nomads has continued, following the inexorable spread of various government-supported developments in Moġān. Material conditions improved in the later 1980s, and in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, movements across the frontier in Moġān were once again allowed (FNI, pp. 298-302, 309-13). By the new century, agricultural production and industry were as extensively developed in Persian Moġān as across the frontier, and Pārsābād, a village of a few hundred people as recently as 1960, was a growing city of many tens of thousands.

See also [‘AŠĀYER](#); [NOMADISM](#); [SHAHSEVAN](#); [SEDENTARIZATION](#); [ŠERVĀN](#).

For early history, Minorsky (1936 and 1938) should be consulted; he is surprisingly silent on the period 1401-1813. The best and most recent local history, especially valuable for the late 19th and the 20th centuries, is by ‘Aziz-zāda, who reproduces a large collection of documents from both national and family archives of Moġān and former Šāhsevan chiefly families, and describes in detail events in Moġān during the 1978-79 revolution; see also Šāhsevand Baġdādi, Nāšeri Belasovar. Active (in 2011) and interesting websites are: [moghanaras.com](http://moghanaras.com) and [moghanshahr.com](http://moghanshahr.com).

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