



SISTĀN II. IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

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ii. In the Islamic period

It was during the governorship in Khorasan of 'Abdallāh b. 'Āmer for the caliph 'Otmān that the Arabs first appeared in Sistān, when in 31/652 Zarang surrendered peacefully, although Bost resisted fiercely. From the base of Zarang, raids were launched eastwards into [Arachosia/Roḡḡaj](#) and [Zamindāvar](#) (q.v.) against the local rulers, the [Zunbils](#) (q.v.), and as far as Kabul, against the [Kābolšāhs](#). A process of gradual Islamization must have begun in Sistān, although Zoroastrianism and Christianity long persisted there, certainly into the 11th century, with the Zoroastrian fire-temple at Karkuya to the north of Zarang long maintained.

During the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid periods, Arab governors continued to be sent out to Sistān, and from their forward base at Bost, these commanders were frequently involved in raiding the lands further east, seeking booty there essentially of slaves. However, the indigenous rulers of these lands in what is now eastern Afghanistan proved to be tenacious foes. The Arabs attempted to exact tribute, but this only came in sporadically. A punitive raid launched in 79/698 against the Zunbil led by the mawlā 'Obaydallāh b. Abi Bakra, the deputy in Sistān of the governor of the East Ḥajjāj b. Yusof (q.v.), penetrated as



far as Zābolestān (q.v.), but was decisively hurled back by the Zunbil's fierce resistance, lack of supplies, and cold weather. It was the privations endured by the Arab troops on these remote frontiers which were a powerful cause of the rebellion in 80-83/699-702 of Ebn al-Aš'at, which nearly toppled the Umayyad caliphate (see Bosworth, 1973, pp. 268-83). Islam did not really gain a foothold in these regions till the time of the Saffarids (see below). The Arabs in Sistān imported thither the tribal and factional feuds of their communities in Khorasan, and there were tensions also between these settlers and the indigenous Iranian population. These factors favored the rise in Sistān of opposition to the central government in Damascus and then Baghdad and to the governors whom the caliphs and then the Tahirid governors of Khorasan sent out, seen especially in the strength in Sistān of Kharijite sectarianism (see [KHARIJITES](#)), first the Azāreqa and then in the early 9th century, the Ḥamziyya, partisans of the local Sistāni leader [Ḥamza b. Āḍarak](#) (see Bosworth, 1968, pp. 87-102).

The Tahirids were unable to retain control in Sistān from the mid-9th century onwards, when there arose there the Saffarid brother [Ya'qub](#) and ['Amr b. Layt](#), initially, it seems, as part of a reaction of Sunni elements in Zarang who were exasperated by the Tahirids' failure to confront the Kharejites and to put an end to these sectaries' depredations over the Sistān countryside. Hence under local leaders, these Sunni groups formed bands of vigilantes, *'ayyārs* or *motaṭawwe'a*, and out of one of such bands Ya'qub emerged and in 247/861 achieved power over the whole province. Over the next forty years he and his brother built up a mighty military empire based on Sistān but extending to Khuzestan and the border of Iraq in the west and towards Kabul in the east (see Bosworth, 1968, pp. 112-23; Bosworth, 1994, pp. 67-168, 193-222). The Samanid riposte to their ambitions, with Esmā'il b. Aḥmad's (q.v.) defeat of 'Amr in 287/900, meant that for the last century of their existence the Saffarid were reduced to being a minor, local power in Sistān, although their last amir, [Ḳalaf b. Aḥmad](#), achieved fame in the wider field of Islamic culture and learning (see Bosworth, 1994, pp. 301-37; idem, 1996, pp. 172-73 n. 84).

The Arabic and Persian geographers of this period give rich information on the topography, economy, and demography of Sistān at this time. They place it in the *garmsir* "hot zone," and emphasize the dominating role of the [Helmand river](#), the Zereh lake (much larger at that time than now; see [HĀMUN](#)) and the network of irrigation channels, with water-mills and dams within Sistān. This water supply, replenished each spring by the melting snows of the central



Afghanistan mountains, sustained the province's agricultural fertility. The alluvial soil brought down by the Helmand waters enabled crops of cereals and legumes to be grown, and the date groves of Sistān were celebrated. On the one hand, the fierce winds that blew across Sistān, most notable the late spring and summer "wind of a hundred and twenty days" (*bād-e šad o bist ruz*) drove windmills, but had the adverse effects raising up sand storms which could strip the land of its soil covering and could swallow up buildings (see Le Strange, *Lands*, pp. 334-35; *Ḥodud al-ʿālam*, tr., p. 110 and commentary, p. 344; Barthold, pp. 65-73).

In 393/1003 Sistān was invaded by Maḥmud of Ghazna and briefly incorporated in his empire before the Saljuqs arrived there and took over in the mid-11th century. There then arose from local notable families two lines of the Maleks of Nimruz, the first of these being the Naṣrid line (421-622/1030-1225; see Bosworth, 1994, pp. 365-410; idem, 1996, pp. 211-12 n. 106). On various occasions, they supplied troop contingents for the armies of the Great Saljuq sultans, including for Sanjar on his expedition of 510/1116-17 against Ghazna. The Maleks were briefly subject to the Khwarazmshahs, but their power was brought to an end by the Mongol invasion of Sistān, and after the withdrawal of the Mongols there arose in their stead a second line of Maleks, the Mehrabānids (633/1236 to mid-16th century; see Bosworth, 1994, pp. 412-77). Their authority within Sistān was frequently squeezed by stronger outside powers like the Karts of Herat, the Timurids and the Shaybanids, but survived into the Safavid period, after which the province came under the rule of *wakils* for the Shahs, this marking the end of independent rule in Sistān by an indigenous family.

The succeeding three centuries of Sistān's history are particularly obscure (for a narrative of the known events, see Tait, 1910-12, pp. 71-99). In the mid-19th century there were disputes between the Durrani kings of Afghanistan and the Qajars of Persia over control of the region, with a Persian invasion in 1865 and the installation of a Persian governor, the Hešmat-al-Molk, Border disputes nevertheless continued, and in 1872 a Seistan Border Commission was set up, awarding much of Sistān to the Persians, but the frontier was not definitively demarcated until a further Boundary Commission of 1903-05 (see Tait, 1909, and the work arising out of these demarcation proceedings, Tait, 1910-12). At the present time, Persian Sistān forms part of the *ostān* of Sistān and Baluĉestān, whilst Afghan Sistān forms the *welāyat* of Nimruz, with a revival here of the mediaeval name.



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See also [TĀRIḲ-E SISTĀN](#).