

2. Human Geography

The Arabian Peninsula comprises the countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen.

Notwithstanding the low aptitude of the subcontinent to support high population densities (see section on ‘Climate’), these countries have witnessed a tremendous population increase over the last 50 years (Table 1).

Table 1. Population in the Arabian Peninsula

Country	Population		Population change, %		Density, persons/km ²	
	1950	2000	1975-80	1995-2000	Overall	Rural
Bahrain	116,000	617,000	4.9	2.0	778	5,789
Kuwait	152,000	1,972,000	6.2	3.1	82	1,017
Oman	456,000	2,542,000	5.0	3.3	9	3,759
Qatar	25,000	599,000	5.8	1.8	53	667
Saudi Arabia	3,201,000	21,607,000	5.6	3.4	8	90
UAE	70,000	2,441,000	14.0	2.0	27	968
Yemen	4,316,000	18,112,000	3.2	3.7	27	690

Source: World Resources Institute (2001) URL: http://earthtrends.wri.org/country_profiles

In all Gulf countries, population increased between 1950 and 2000, by a factor of 5 to 30. The more spectacular growth rates (e.g., Kuwait, Qatar, UAE) are mostly due to a large net immigration of guest workers. However, the population data for Yemen, a country of net emigration, shows that increase in the native population is also a major contributing factor to population growth in the Peninsula.

The distribution of the population centers is shown in Figure 1. With the exception of the agricultural hinterland of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, most of the population lives at the edges of the Peninsula, near coastal areas or in the mountains bordering the sea. This is to be expected. Given the aridity of the interior, people have historically concentrated in areas with higher rainfall (e.g., Yemen, Asir), or along trade routes. As the rainfall map shows, the density of population centers is associated with the higher rainfall areas. Very few people, with the exception of nomadic tribes, live in the desert interior.

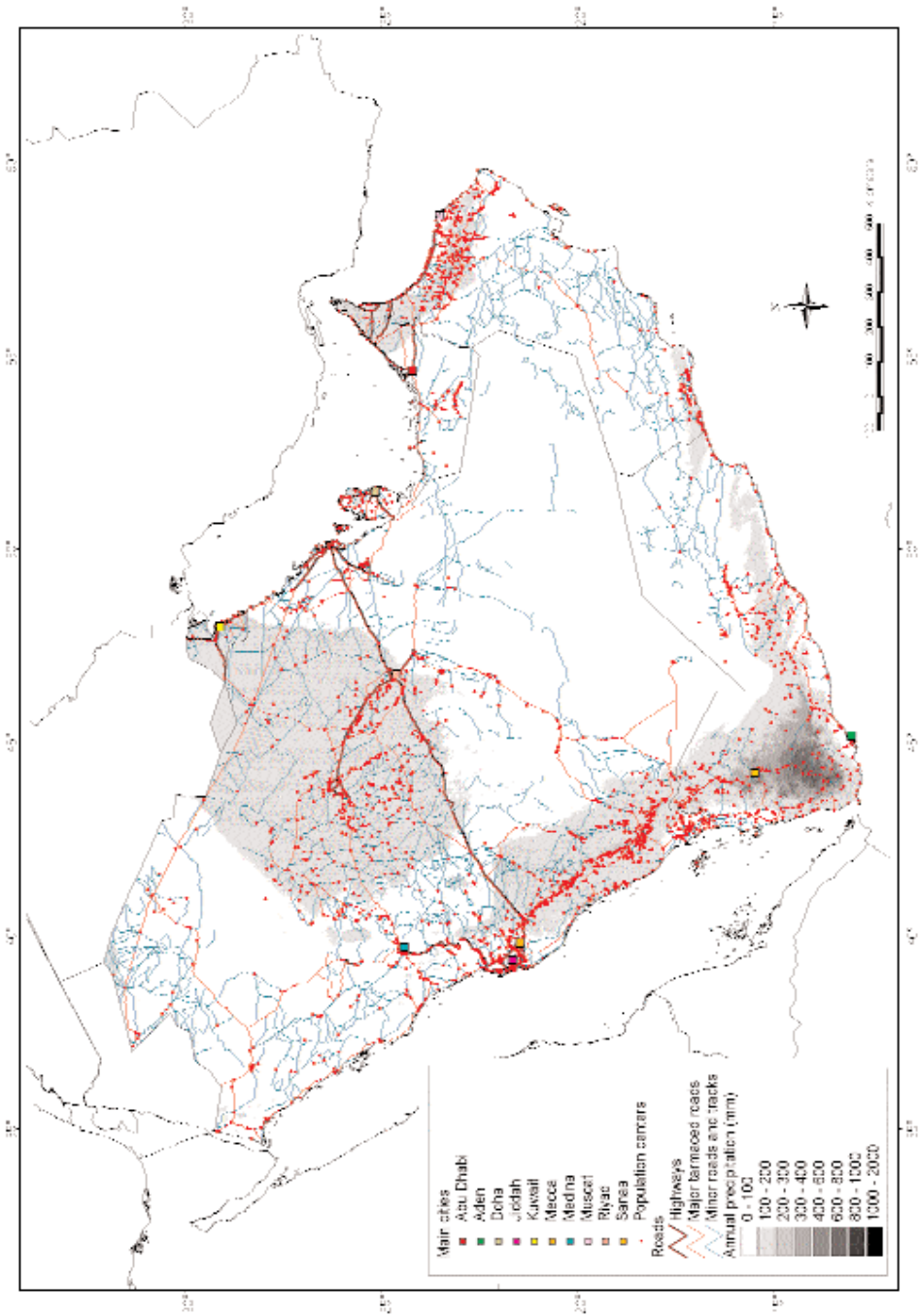


Fig. 1: Arabian Peninsula: General

The population density is shown in Figure 2. The subcontinent is characterized by generally low population density and high urbanization, with pockets of high rural population density. A high proportion of the country population still makes a living in agriculture in Yemen, and to a lesser extent in Saudi Arabia. Low cropland area (Table 1) and urbanization of the countryside (e.g., Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, UAE) might artificially raise the rural population density above levels that bear any relationship with the intensity of rural land use.