

**LOYALTY AND OPPOSITION  
IN KUWAITI POLITICS**

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A paper presented to the workshop on 'Controlled Contestation and Opposition Strategies?: Authoritarian Electors in the Middle East' held at Brown University, U.S.A. October 1998

# **LOYALTY AND OPOSITION**

## **IN KUWAITI POLITICS**

**'Our Sheikh is the Rooster and we are his Chicken'**

A popular chant ('Artha) amoung Urbanized Badouin in Kuwait.

(1)

Before addressing the issue of loyalty and opposition in any polictical system one has to have a clear understanding as to how that political system functions against its particular socio-cultural set-up. This should be self-evident by simply raising the question of loyalty and opposition. Normally, this question will not arise in a political discourse if the concept of citizenship is well established, since loyalty and opposition are articulated in constitutional arrangements and institutions.

The fact that we are raising this question implies that the concept of citizenship i.e. the rights and duties of an autonomous individual with equal access to resources and justice - theoretically is in serious doubt. Not only that an individual citizen's loyalty is in question; loyalty to whom or to what?, but also his right to oppose a particular regime-in-power is seriously and grievously curtailed.

We know it as a matter of fact that all democracies are imperfect, but in the Third World the possibility of a democratic governace and polity is no where applicable by any acceptable measure of accuracy, no matter how lax or elastic. For this reason when speaking of Democracy in the Third World we are faced with a quandry, to the extent that democracy in the Third World always comes qualified, almost beyond recognition.

When the first wave of democratization (and not democracy) in the Third World began in the eighties, O'Donell and his coleagues did not find a way of describing it other than 'Uncertain Democracy'. Later on it came to pass that Third World Democracy is distinguished from First World Democracy as being weak rather than strong, or soft as compared to hard.

More recently, we have another distinctive sort of a democracy, called 'Defensive Democracy' in Glenn Robinson parlance (as opposed to what?) as applied to Jordan. But the qualifying term that I really like, which combines humour with seriousness is Tetrault's description of Kuwaiti democracy as 'Designer-Democracy'.

What needs to be said is that all Third World democracies or more accurately, Third World application of some style of Western democratic rule is designer-democracies - that is designed consciously by a ruling elite to disguise authoritarian rule as democracy, simply and mostly by introducing some form of elections, and/or some measure of political openness. Third World Democracy did not evolve 'naturally' from within a political system, and achieved a break with the traditional despotic or autocratic rule. And this is, partly, the reason of the difficulty of why democracy, however defined, is not taking a deeper root in the Third World.

for

I felt compelled to write this relatively long introduction to my topic, because I think that the whole issue of democratization in the Third World is focussing on the wrong aspect of a continuing historical phenomenon. It is not the question of how democratically a society is ruled but rather, how a society is efficiently managed, and effectively controlled, in a continuing historical process. This is in my opinion, and in the real world, real focus. 44

A political system is a system of technology of control. It will always oscillate between relative openness (more popular participation, more or less autonomous corporate civil society ... etc.) and relative closedness (absolutist, autocratic, tyrannical or authoritarian rule). I cannot imagine that democracy flowered wildly in Athens more than two thousand years ago, for a few hundred odd years, and stayed 'dormant' until the West rediscovered it after the French and American Revolutions.

It is therefore a much harder task of explaining the workings of technological system of political control, its mechanization, the various ways a regime-in-power is legitimized, the ethos of the regimes - its ideological underpinnings, and how a set of ruling arrangements are 'embedded' in the socio-economic system - than mere finding out how democratic a regime-in-power is, assuming that a Western model is implicitly used as a standard of measurement.

Here I would like to pose an issue that is seldom, if at all, raised in the political discourse of democracy. It is almost always claimed by Western Writers that power - and control is imposed on the individual citizen externally - from the outside. Whereas in many cases power -regulatory power - or social control is internalized by the individual citizen - which forms him as a subject - and defines him as a citizen i.e. articulate his sense of belonging to the group; a tribal-sectarian - ethnic or the national group.

This is, to emphasize, is not an abdication of power, as it is implied by the Kuwaiti tribal chant I quoted at the beginning of my paper, as much as an expression of a sense of belonging to the 'national group'. When a tribal-sectarian attachments (or primordial sentiments/ attachment is Geertz terminology) is prevalent in a society - (vs a sense of belonging to national group (or civil state according to Geertz), one should look at these sentiments and attachments as a vortex. All social relations are affected by it and all political arrangements are influenced by it.

This is a phenomenon - I described elsewhere as political tribalism - Sectarianism. It is a form of corporatism in which tribal-sectarian corporations are not ~~autonomous~~ or independent of State Authority, but rather, as extensions of that authority. Thus the leaders of these corporations or 'patri families' derive their authority from the State as being representative of it. All real benefits and privileges an individual attains are channelled through these corporate arrangements and not through State machinery and institutions. autonomous

It comes as no surprise, then, that loyalty in this context is personalized - that is loyalty is to the person of the ruler and his family or clan. Loyalty in this context is collective and not individual - that is loyalty as a group who share in the benefits and privileges allotted to them as a corporation. When a certain demand is placed on the tribal-sectarian groups in return for these benefits and privileges, that demand should be met by the whole group - or the majority of its members.

The same thing or in a similar fashion political opposition is undermined by the control ~~by~~ of the State of these benefits and privileges - which I will explain shortly below. Curtailment of the right to opposition is reinforced by banning political parties, which prevents the formation of constitutional organized oppositional movements. The pretext given for banning political parties is that they might become tribal pressure groups, which is true, or become so called political shops (Dakakin Siyasiyah) and agents for foreign or other countries interests (along the Lebanese model), which may not be necessarily true.

Now Kuwait, unlike other Arab Peninsula and other Mashriq countries had a relatively long history with participating democracy beginning in 1920, and 1938. The 1920 attempt at participatory democracy failed because the Oligarchs strongly disagreed among themselves on the method of selecting a ruling Amir. And the 1938 experiment lasted only six months when the Arab Nationalists raised the issue of who will be the recipient of national revenue from oil.

But the 1961 experiment with participatory democracy succeeded and endured many constitutional crises (in 1967, 1976, 1985 and 1989), because it was based on a series of compromises and unwritten deals. And that is where the technology of control comes into full play. The first compromise was to enshrine the rule of one branch of the Al-Sabah family into the fourth article of the constitution.

The second and more serious compromise is to give the ruling Amir virtual veto power on the parliament, so that no decree or law can be passed without the approval of the ruling Amir. One escape mechanism was left open for the Amir, is that if he chose not to sign an unpopular decree into law, is to let the one month deadline required by the constitution lapse, without returning it to the Parliament, which allows it automatically to become law.

In the absence of parliament an Amiri decree has the force of a law. On many occasions, the parliament is unconstitutionally absent, being dissolved by decree. On his return it can only pass or reject an Amiri decree, it does not have the power of amending these decrees.

In addition, one fifth of parliament members are ministers, who, although are unelected, function as full members of parliament with full voting rights. A major compromise involves the no confidence vote in the government. The constitution of 1961 provides for no confidence vote in one minister at a time, but it does not give the parliament any provision of a no confidence on the government as a whole.

One reason for this is that the prime minister is the heir-apparent, who acts officially and by convention as a permanent prime-minister. Such constitutional arrangements renders the

parliament powerless in the matter of forming or dissolving government, but gives the right to the Amir and his heir apparent - the prime minister to dissolve parliament whenever they deem it politically expedient or occasionally convenient.

The  
right

Even with all the trapping of a democratic rule and political openness in Kuwaiti society, the technology of control exercised by the regime-in-power, constitutionally insures that loyalty is accorded to the ruling family and not to the State and its institutions. The working of this system of controls curtails political opposition, especially organized opposition in many other ways, unwritten in the constitution.

We mentioned earlier that all advantages and privileges are channelled through the parallel system of political tribalism. Actually all the major public services do not function properly through official channels. If the individual citizen needs a commercial permit, or to start a business, or to obtain a government financed house, or a job for himself or one of his relatives, or a favour of any kind within the jurisdiction of a high official ....etc., he will need an intermediary - someone with influence and/or leverage. And if that individual does not belong to a high and mighty family - and oligarchic family, he is forced to seek a parliamentary deputy who has both the influence and leverage to provide this service to members of his constituent. The vast majority of the members of the Kuwaiti parliaments are selected to fulfil the role of intermediaries to provide such services. And they are aptly called in Arabic 'Nuwab Al-Khadamat' i.e. services deputies.

If a particular deputy is in good standing with the government and/or the ruling family he is rewarded by performing the required services, but if he is not on good terms with government officials, for criticizing government policies or by opposing a government project he is denied any favour, which renders him useless to his constituents. The very few deputies who belong to this unfortunate minority are called 'Nuwab Al-Mabadi' the deputies of principles.

The service deputies come in two varieties; The tribal deputies and conservative independent deputies. The tribal deputies all selected through a procedure called the tribal primary or by-election: Al-Intikhabat Al-Fariyah - which has been criminalized a few months ago by the parliament. The independent conservative deputies should be considered the loyalist deputies, who have always formed the parliamentary majorities, ever since the first parliament of the 1960s.

The distribution of the parliamentary deputies of the last two parliaments after the liberation of Kuwait is conveyed in Table No. 1. In this table the calculus of loyalty and opposition is not straight forward as it may seem. The second group, which is the largest is composed of the services deputies (27 deputies for 1992 parliament and 34 deputies for the 1996 parliament). Among this group, the personality of the deputy and not his political or ideological principle plays a major part, but when it comes down to the final note, his is always prepared to vote for the ~~vote~~ for the government.

The second group is composed of so-called religious movements whose numbers remained stable at 11 in 1992 and 1996. They present themselves as deputies of principles, they occasionally oppose to the government, but always shy away from a showdown with it. They have persistently resisted forming an alliance or a front with the popular 'permanent' opposition.

*deputies*

Table No. 1

Kuwaiti Parliamentary Deputies of 1992 and 1996 Parliaments,  
by Political and Tribal Affiliation

Political Affiliation	1992 Parliament		1996 Parliament	
	Number of Deputies		Number of Deputies	
Muslim Brotherhood	5		4	
Salafi Group	4		4	
Shura Alliance	2		3	
Tribal Deputies	9		10	
Conservative Independents	6		17	
Liberal Independents	12		7	
Other Independents	10		3	
Popular Opposition	2		2	
Total Deputies	50		50	

Source: Based on the Authors calculation and classification scheme.

In the final analysis, then the Kuwaiti experiment in participatory democracy has resulted in a parliament which has no say in the formation of government, and has no means to override the veto power of the ruling Amir, and a permanent prime minister, and virtually permanent government with changing ministers in a musical chairs fashion, and a government with a permanent parliamentary majority, and an oppositional movement unable, or cannot afford to be confrontational. Such are the workings of the technology of control in a 'truly' participatory democracy.

The government of Kuwait, managed to tighten its controls over the population by a 'truly' democratic means by passing through parliament (having secured a permanent majority) several unconstitutional laws, the most flagrant of which are the press law, the nationality law, the electoral law by which it prevented women from acquiring the right to vote, and free assembly law, which gives the government powers to restrict free assembly similar to marshall law, though these powers seldom used in recent years.

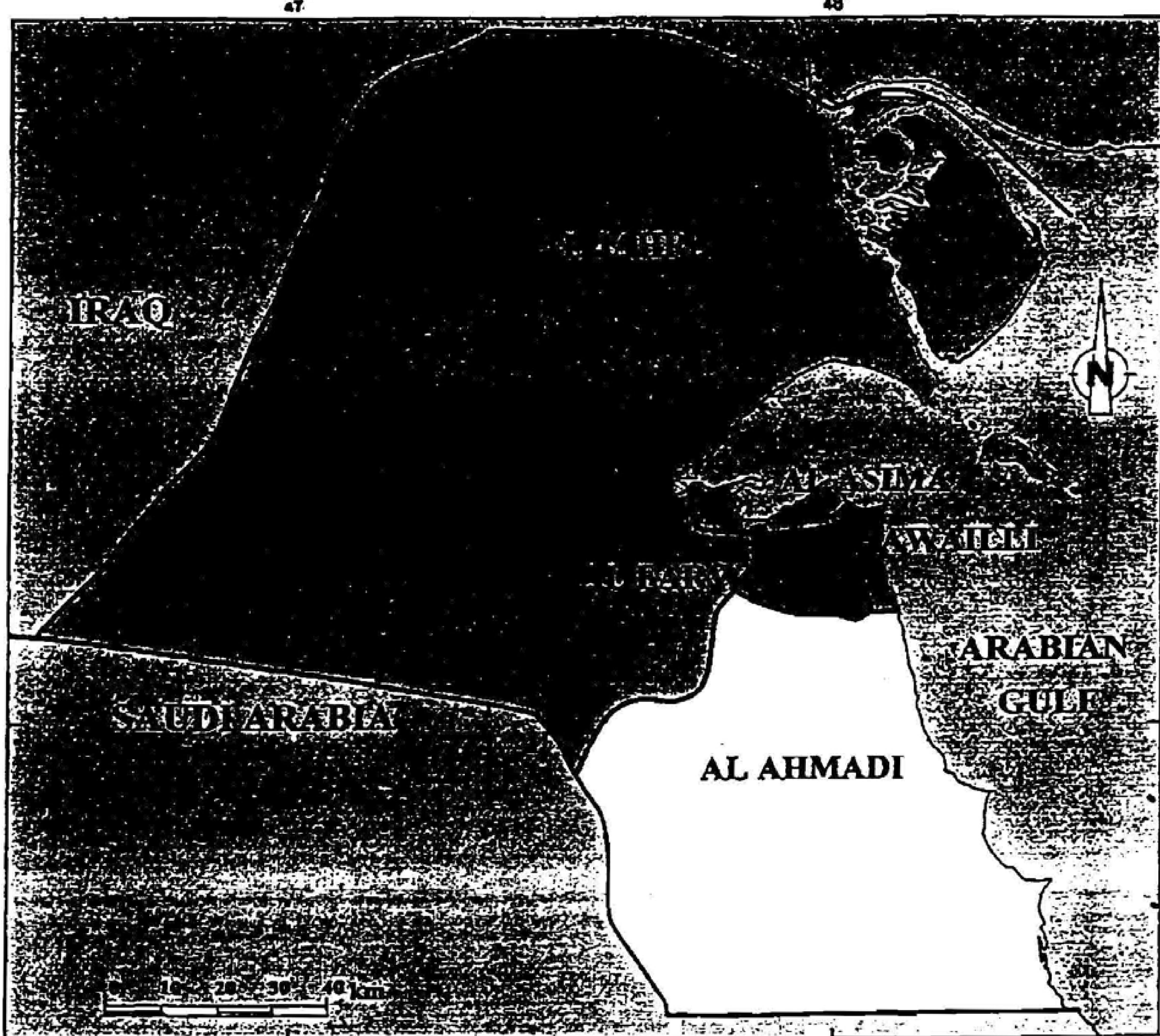
Beyond that, there were still at least three dangers that potentially threatened the system of controls just described. The first danger came the possibility of consolidation of tribal-sectarian power according to residential patterns. Two groups represented the greater threat; The Al-Awazim tribal group, and the ~~Shia~~ minority in Kuwait. A third group of the old tenth district of Al-Ahmadi represented a third possibility.

In an unpublished study by J. Karam and J. Al-Ali shows in graphic details how the government of Kuwait resorted to gerrymandering and malapportionment to avoid this danger, and avert the consolidation of residential patterns that can be translated into electoral gains. Map no. 1 shows the electoral boundaries of the ten districts in 1962, where district no 10 contained the majority of Ajman, and districts no. 9 and no. 8 the Awazim and Shia.

Map no. 2 shows the effects of dividing Kuwait into 25 electoral districts instead of 10 in 1982. Keeping in mind that in 1976 the Shia managed to send 10 deputies to the parliament, or one fifth of the total. In 1981 the first district: Al-Sharq lost 3 deputies (from 5 to 2), the seventh district became the fourth lost three deputies (from 5 to 2), both of these contained a majority of Shia. While the old ninth which contained a majority of Awazim was divided into two districts (No. 12 and 13) lost one deputy.

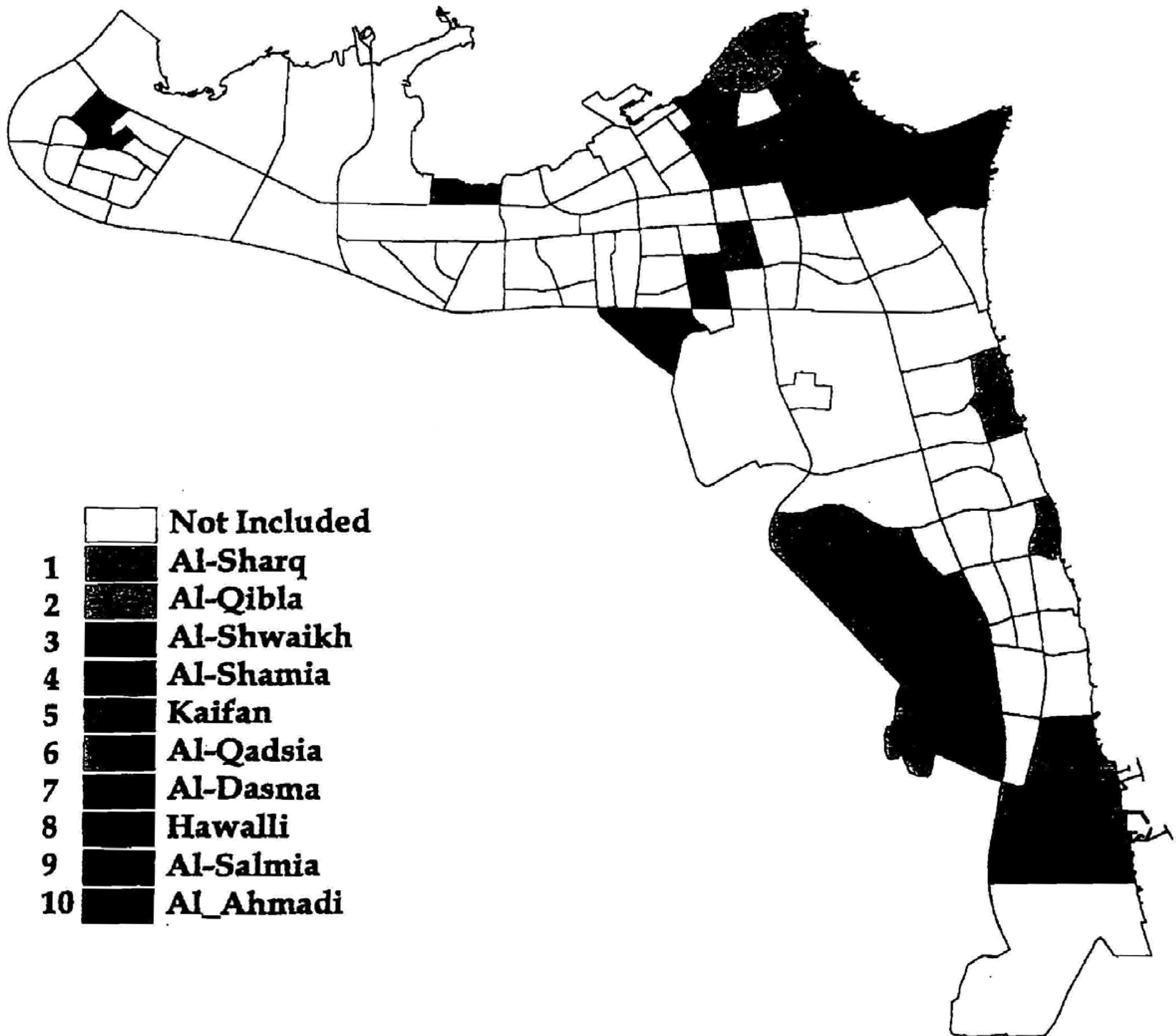
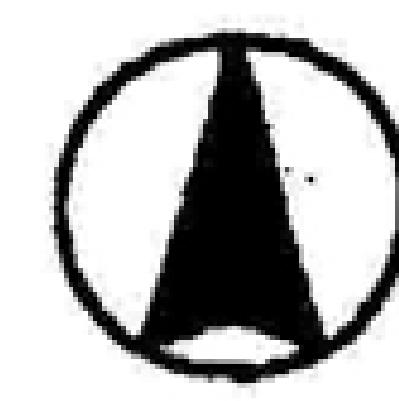
At the same time, the tenth district was divided into five districts (no 21 through 25) doubled the number of their deputies (from 5 to 10) but became a conglomeration of several tribes. Table No. 3 gives examples of the effects of gerrymandering in high relief.

As for the malapportionment of the numbers of voters, figures no. 1 and 2, 3 shows to what extent there is a disparity between number of voters in several electoral districts. The conclusion that I would like to reach from this discussion is that redistricting was not done to achieve justice in the number of voters. On the contrary it was deliberately done to avoid consolidation of tribal or sectarian voting blocks. Looking at figure no. 3 closely, you can see examples of the new dividing lines between urban internal districts (No. 2, 3 and 7) and urbanized bedouins in external districts (No 13, 16 and 25) while district no. 8 is a mixture of the two.



خريطة رقم -٢-

# Electoral Boundaries 1962



0 2 4 6 8 10 km

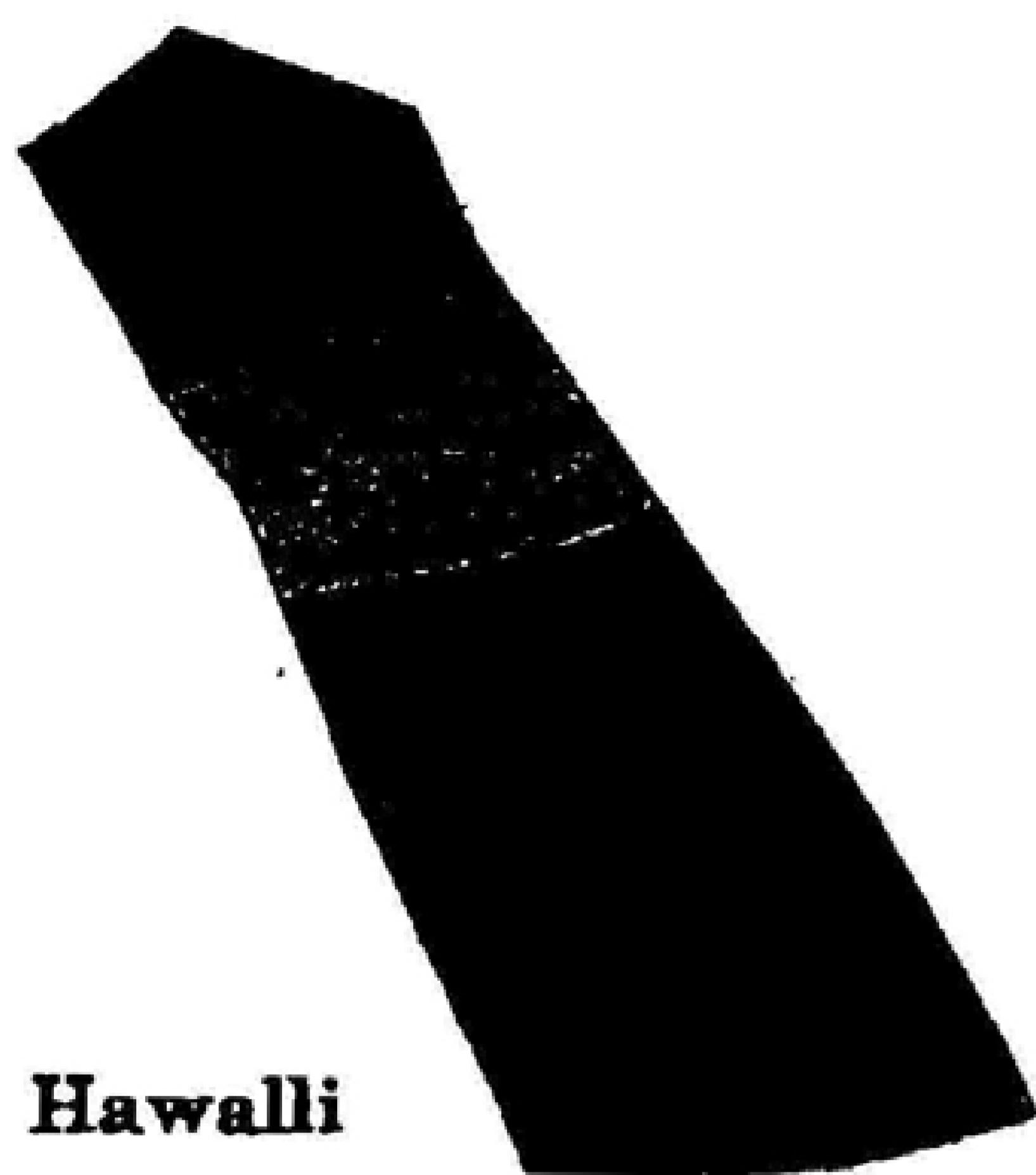
# Electorial Boundaries 1981



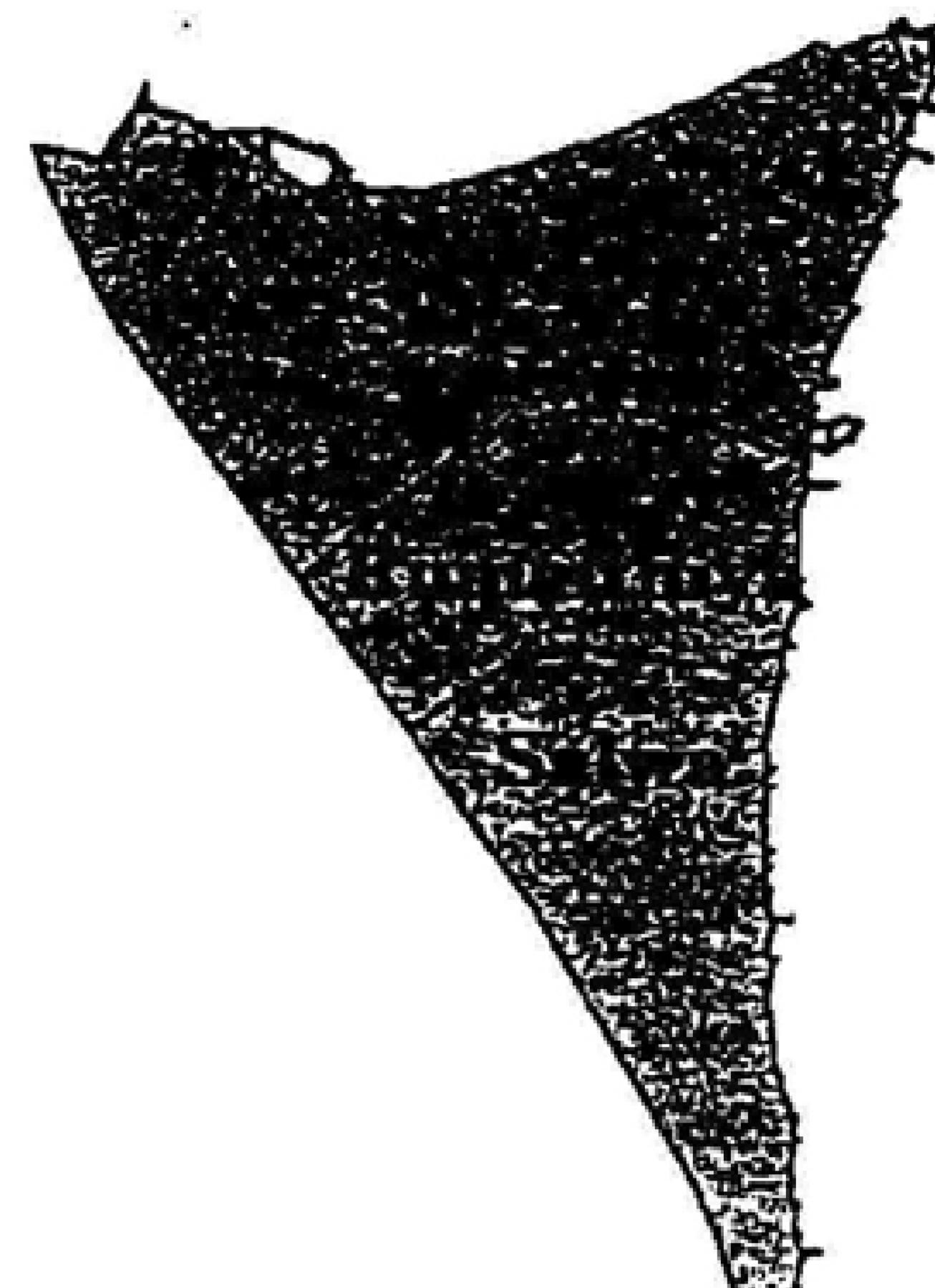
0 2 4 6 8 10 km

خريطة رقم - ٢ -

# Examples of Gerymandering in Kuwait 1981



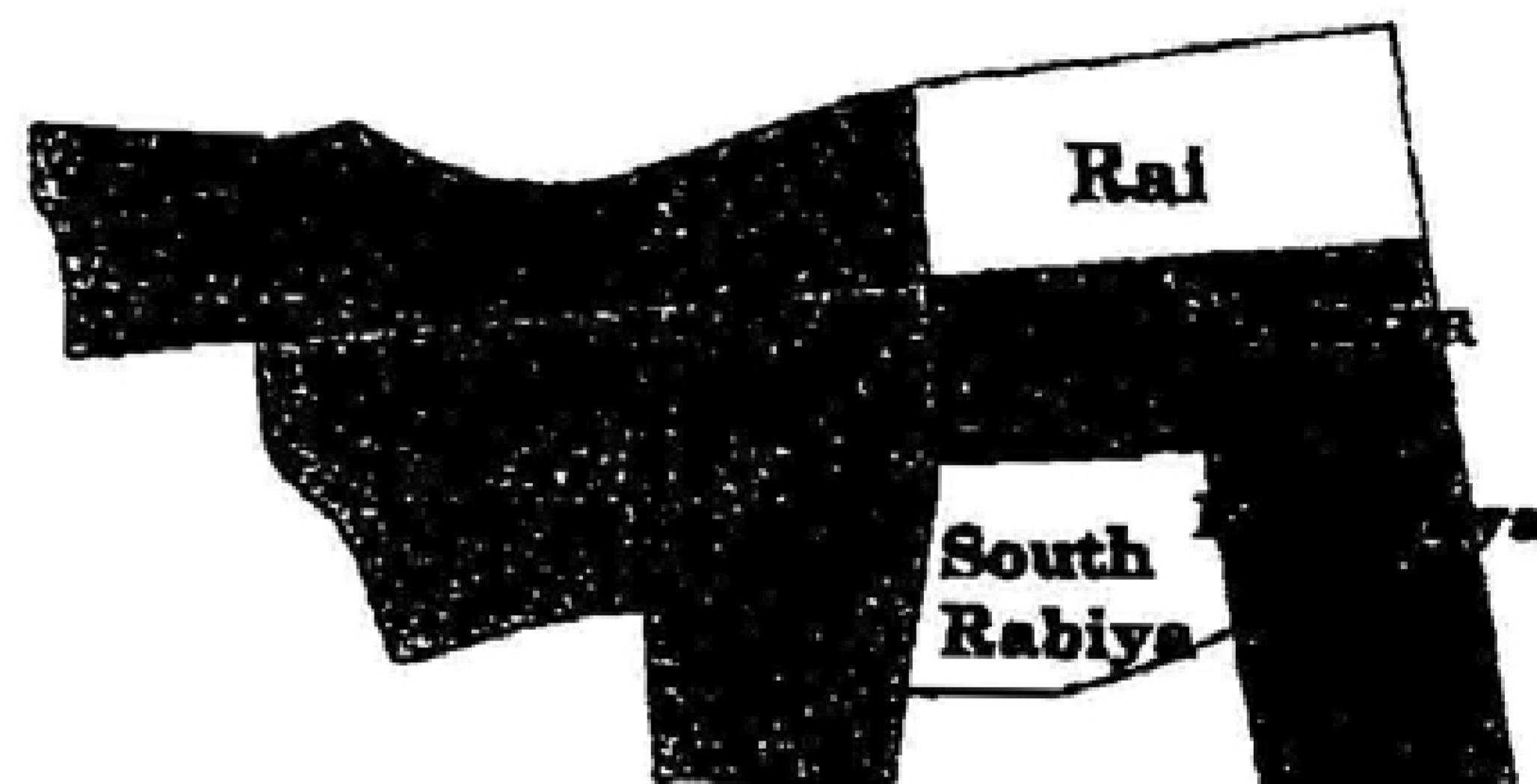
Hawalli



Salmiya



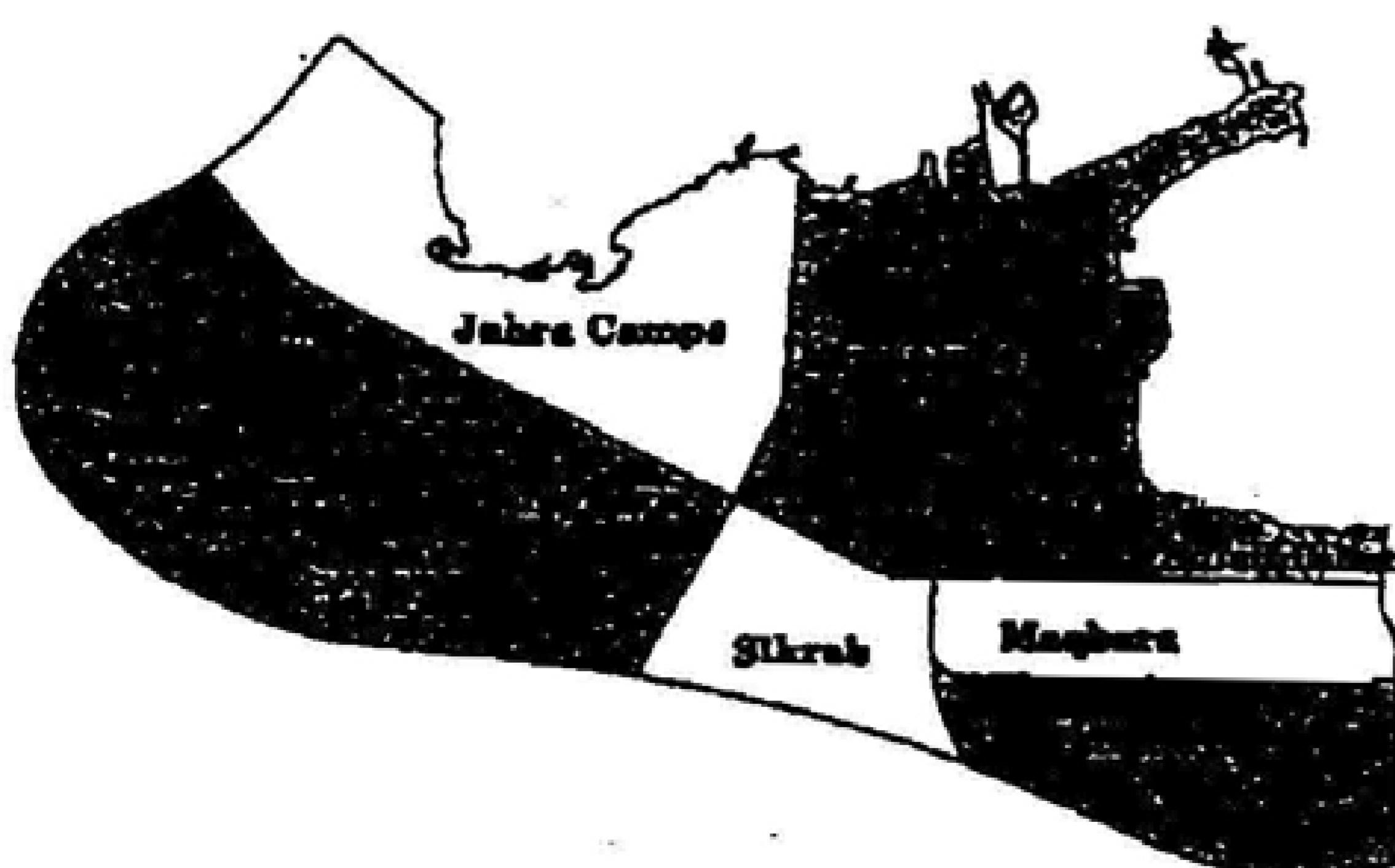
AL\_Farwaniya



Al-Omairia



Al-Edailia

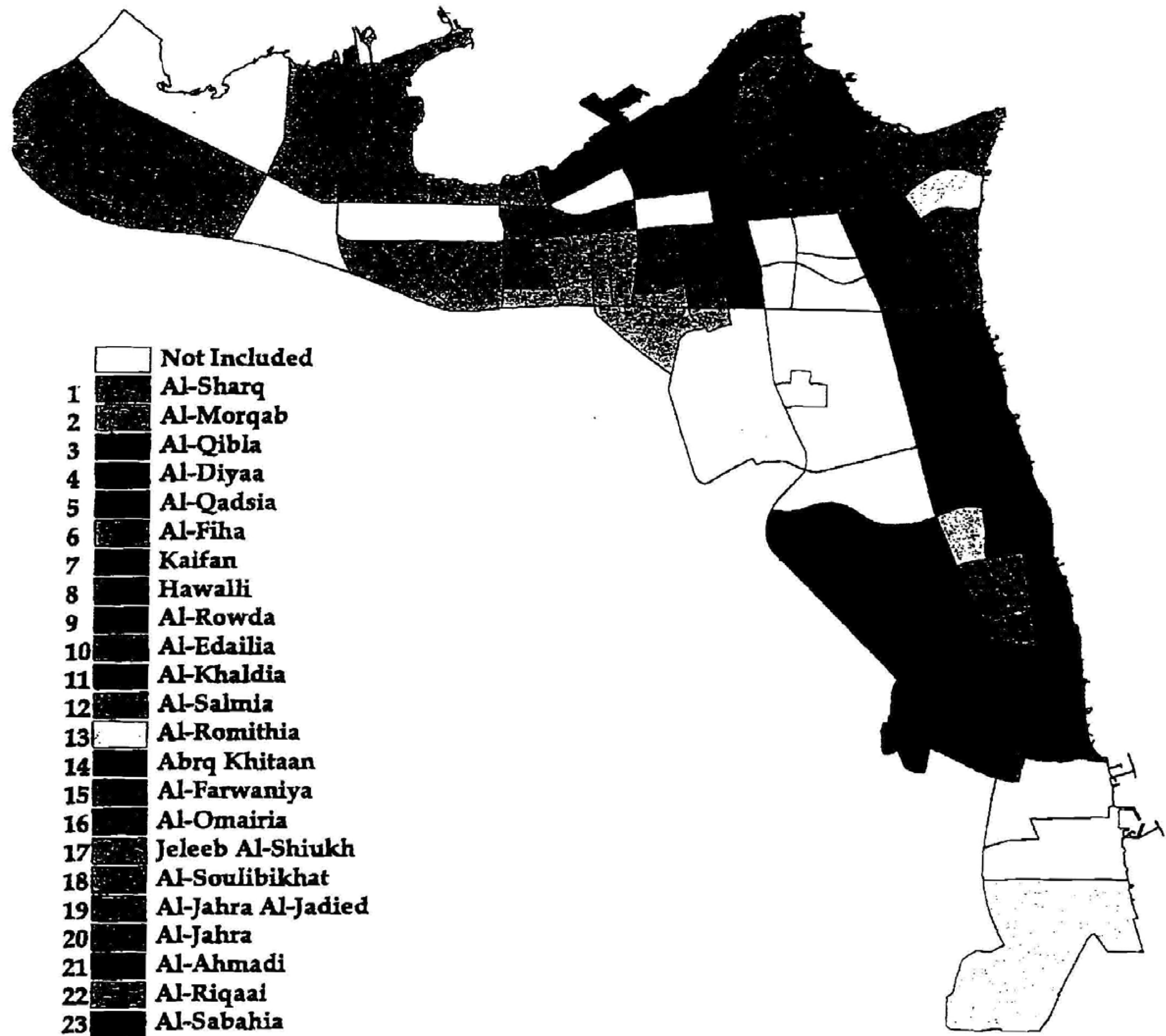


Al-Jahra



Al-Ahmadi

# Electorial Boundaries 1996

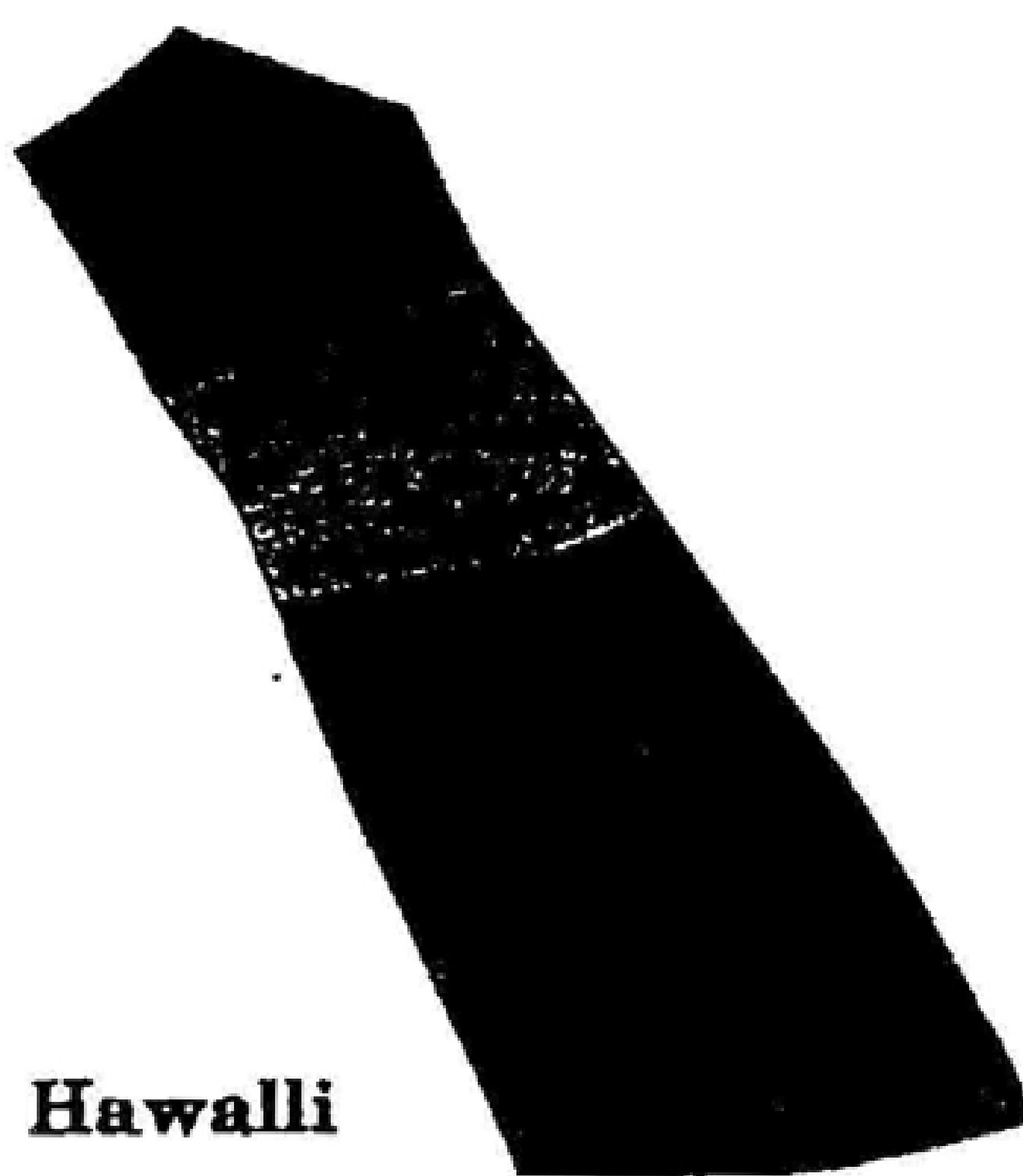


0 2 4 6 8 10 km

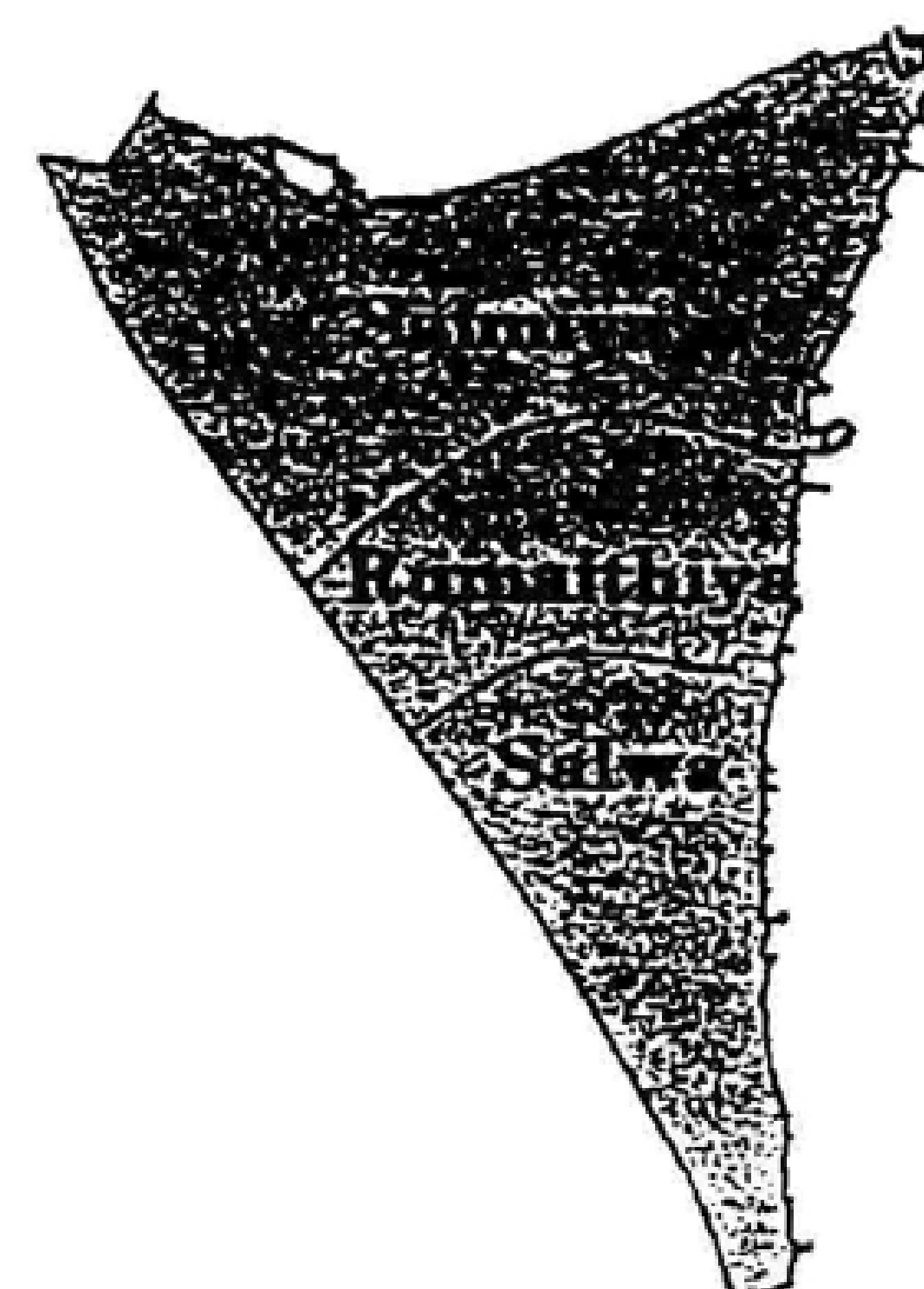
خريطة رقم - ٥

# Examples of Gerymandering in Kuwait 1996

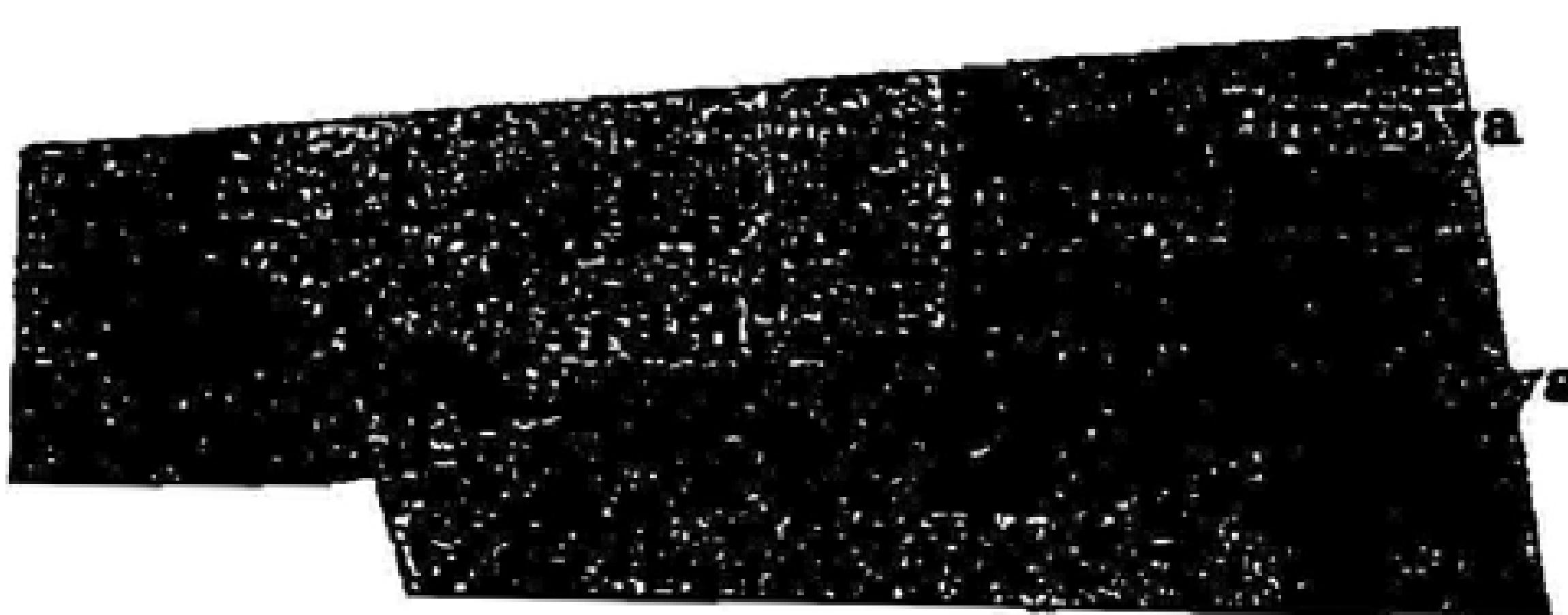
خريطة رقم - ٦ -



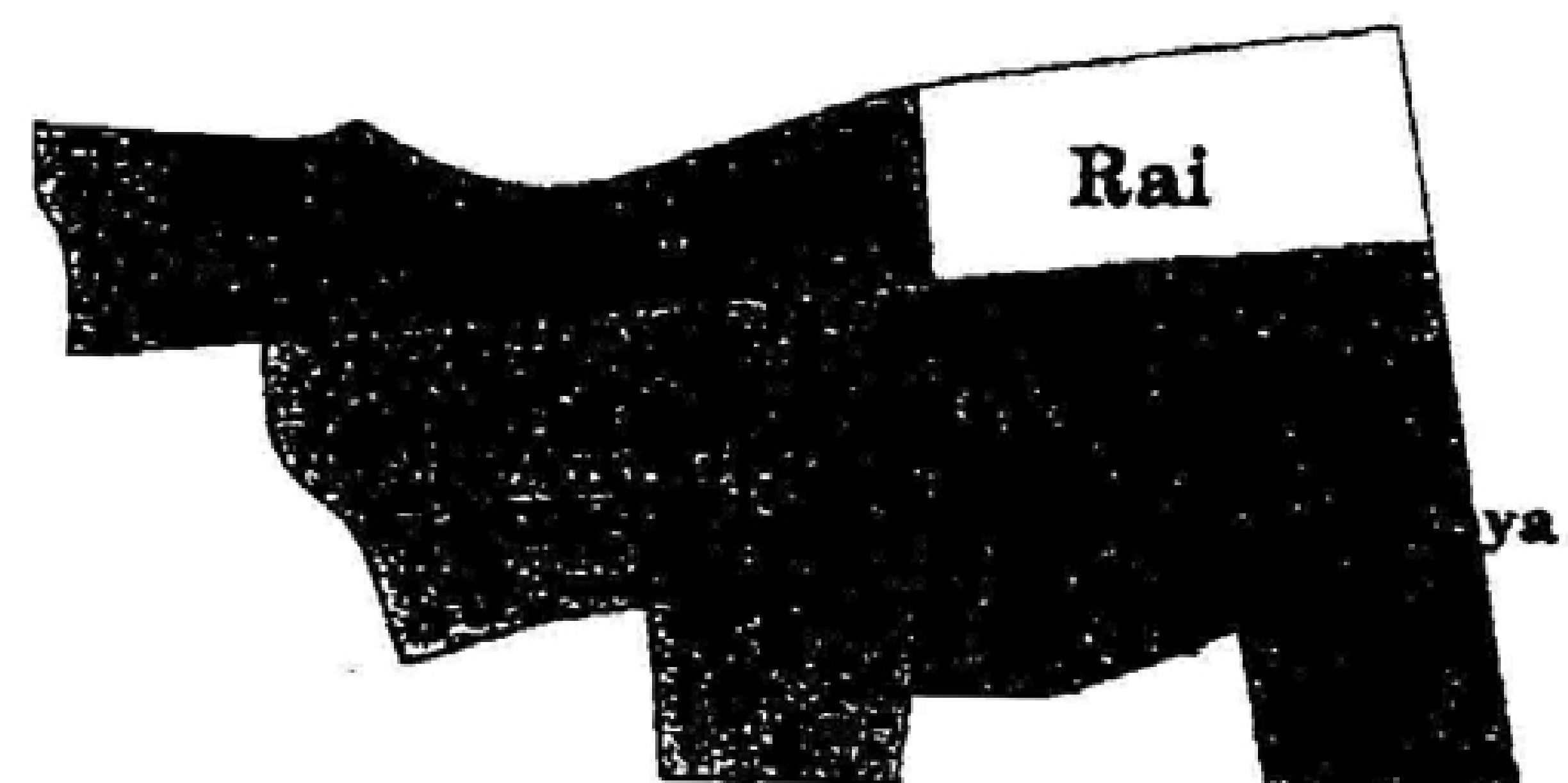
Hawalli



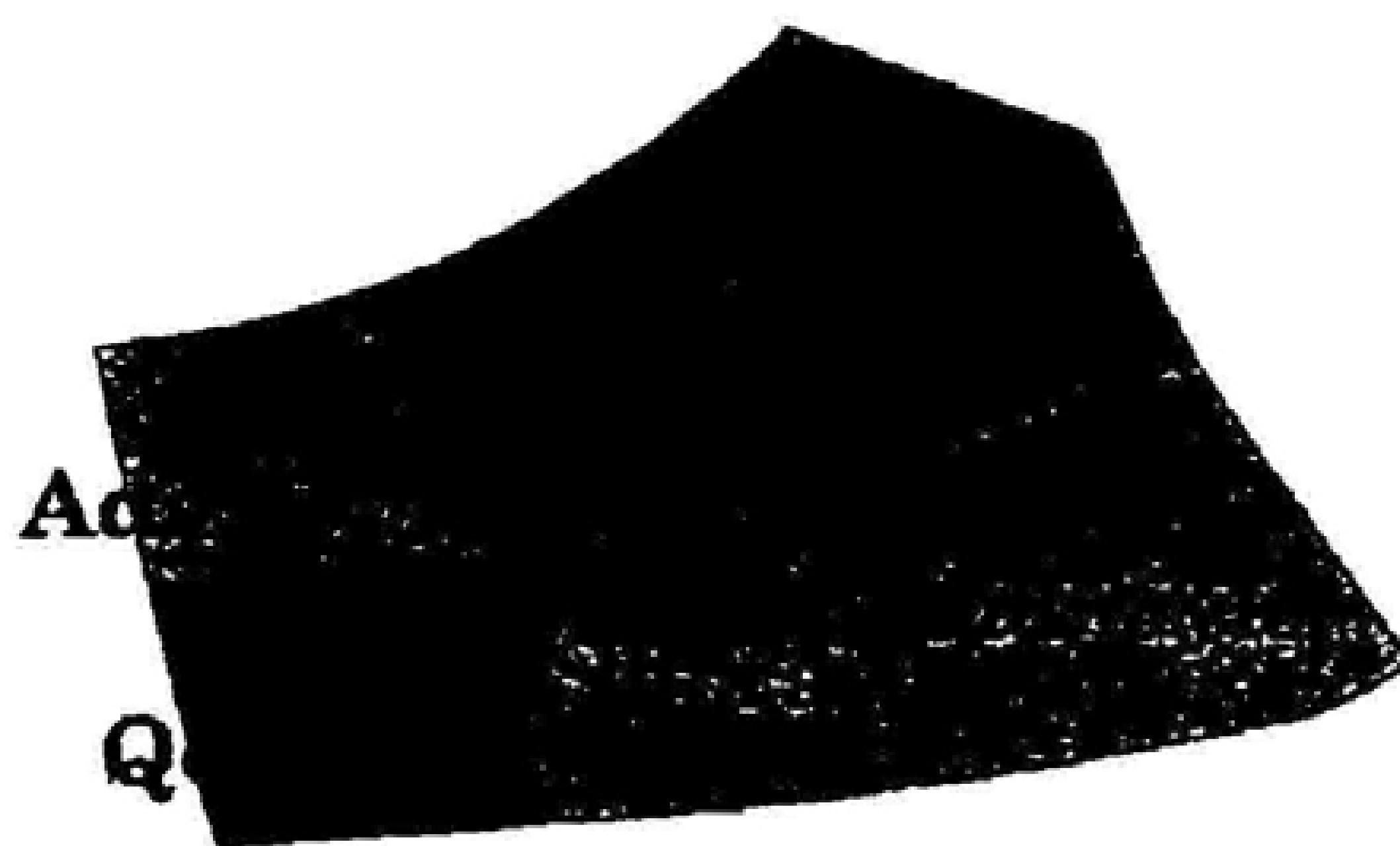
Salmiya



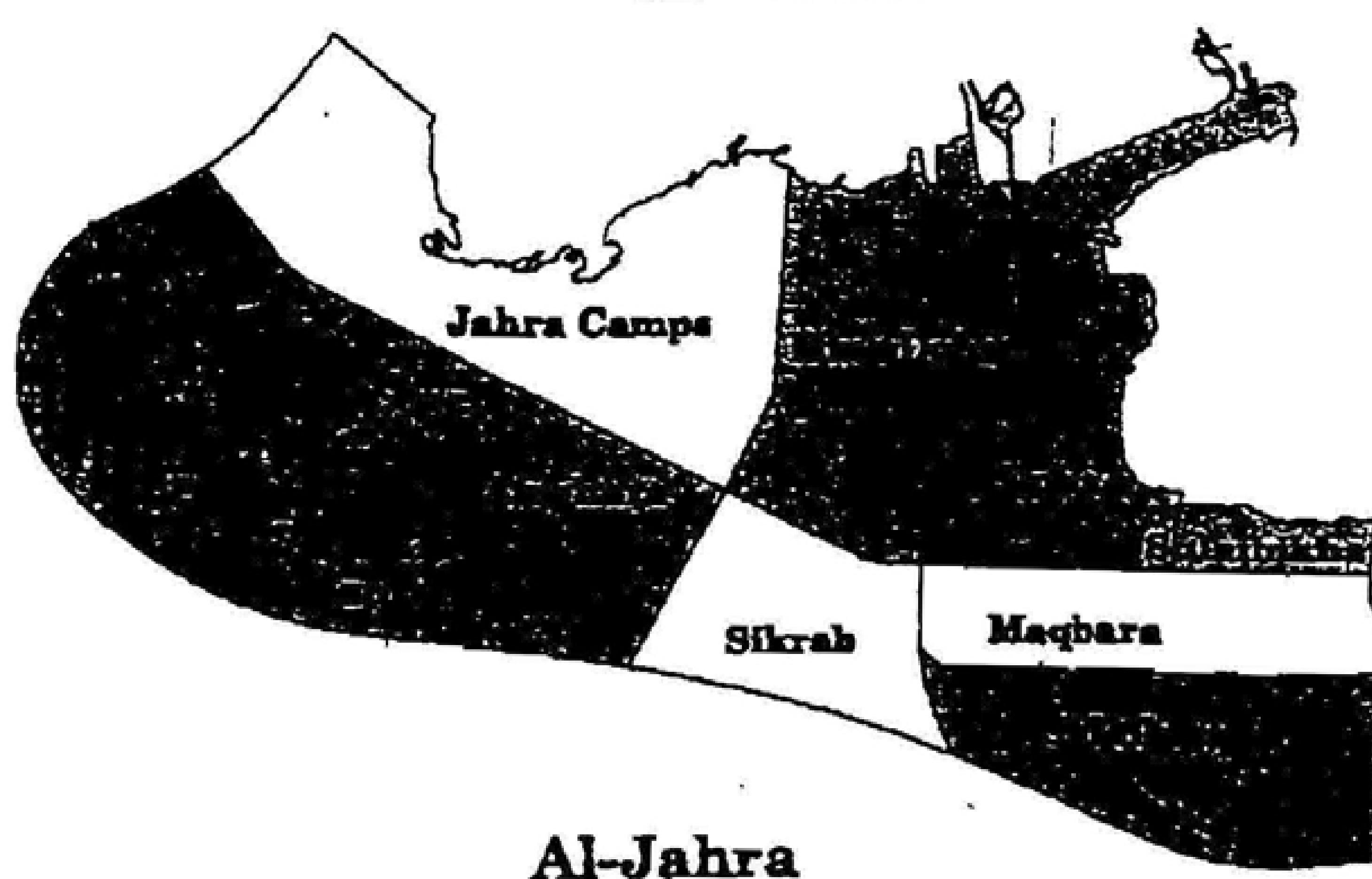
AL\_Farwaniya



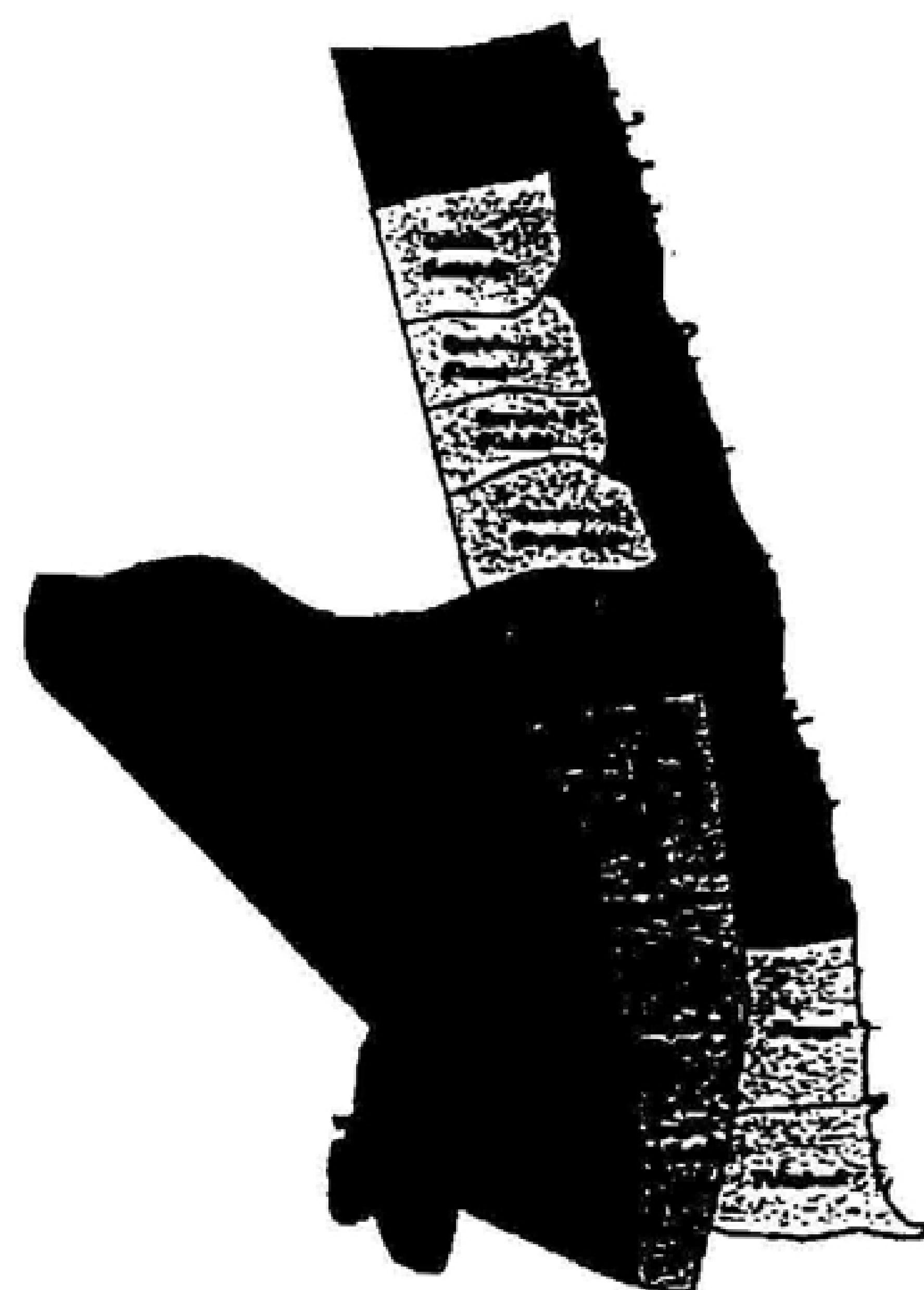
Al-Omairia



Al-Edailia



Al-Jahra



Al-Ahmadi  
Al-Fahahil

Figure no. 1. 'Suhah' Distribution in Some Electoral Districts in 1975.

شكل ( ١ ) توزيع عدد الناخبين على الدوائر الانتخابية لسنة ١٩٧٥م

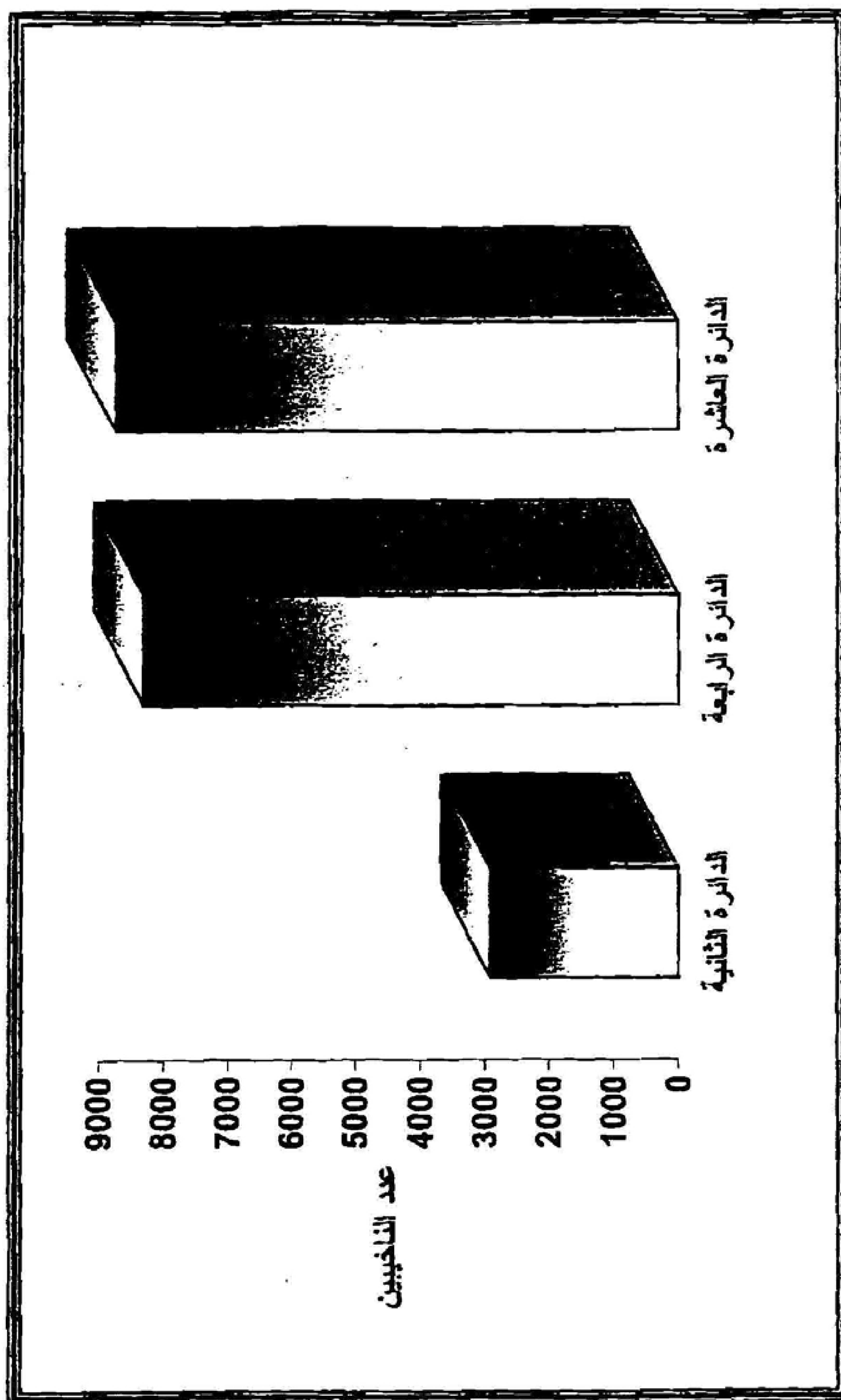


Figure no.2. No. 2. Voters' Distribution in Some Electoral Districts

١٩٥١ مـ

شكل (٢) توزيع عدد الناخبين على الدوائر الانتخابية لسنة ١٩٦٩م

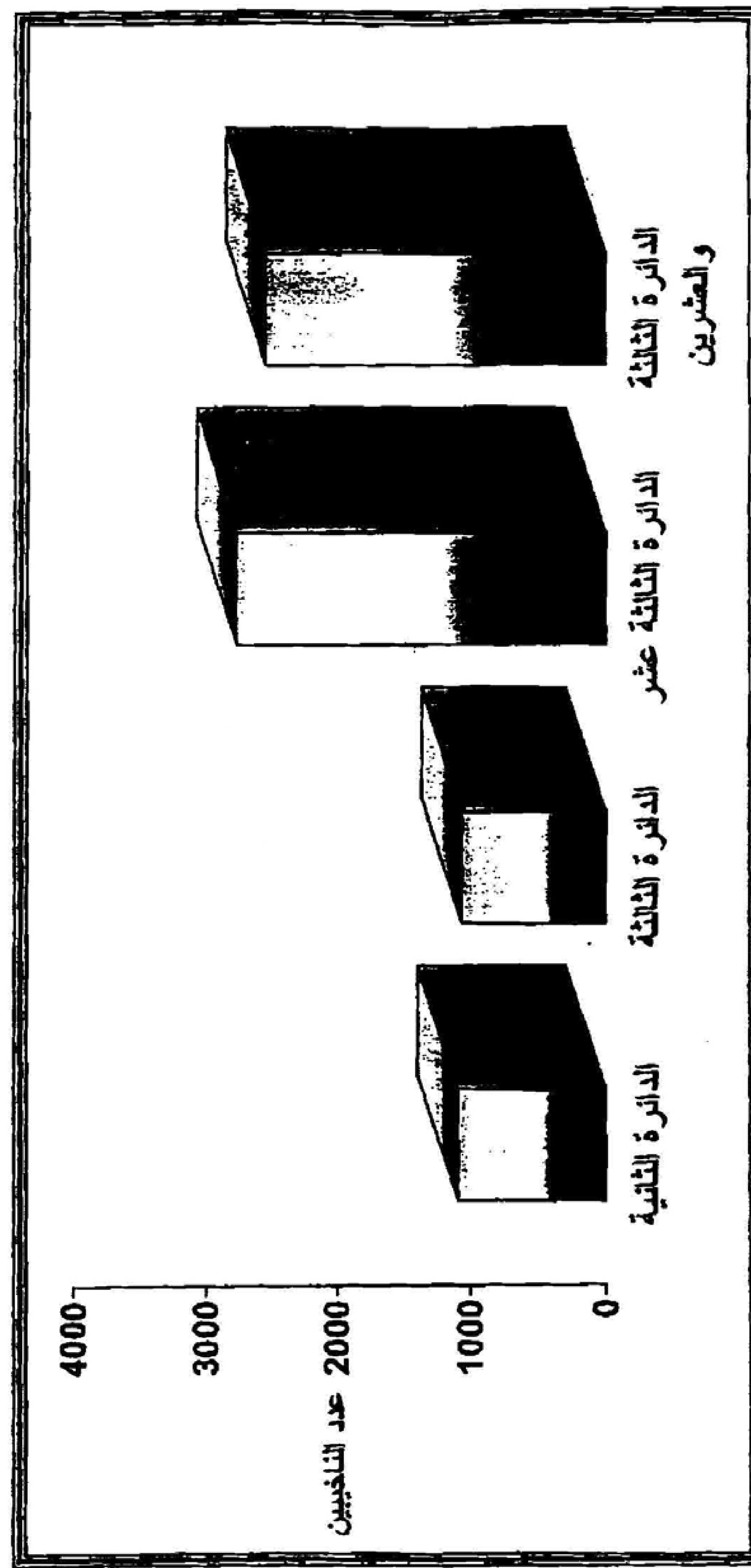
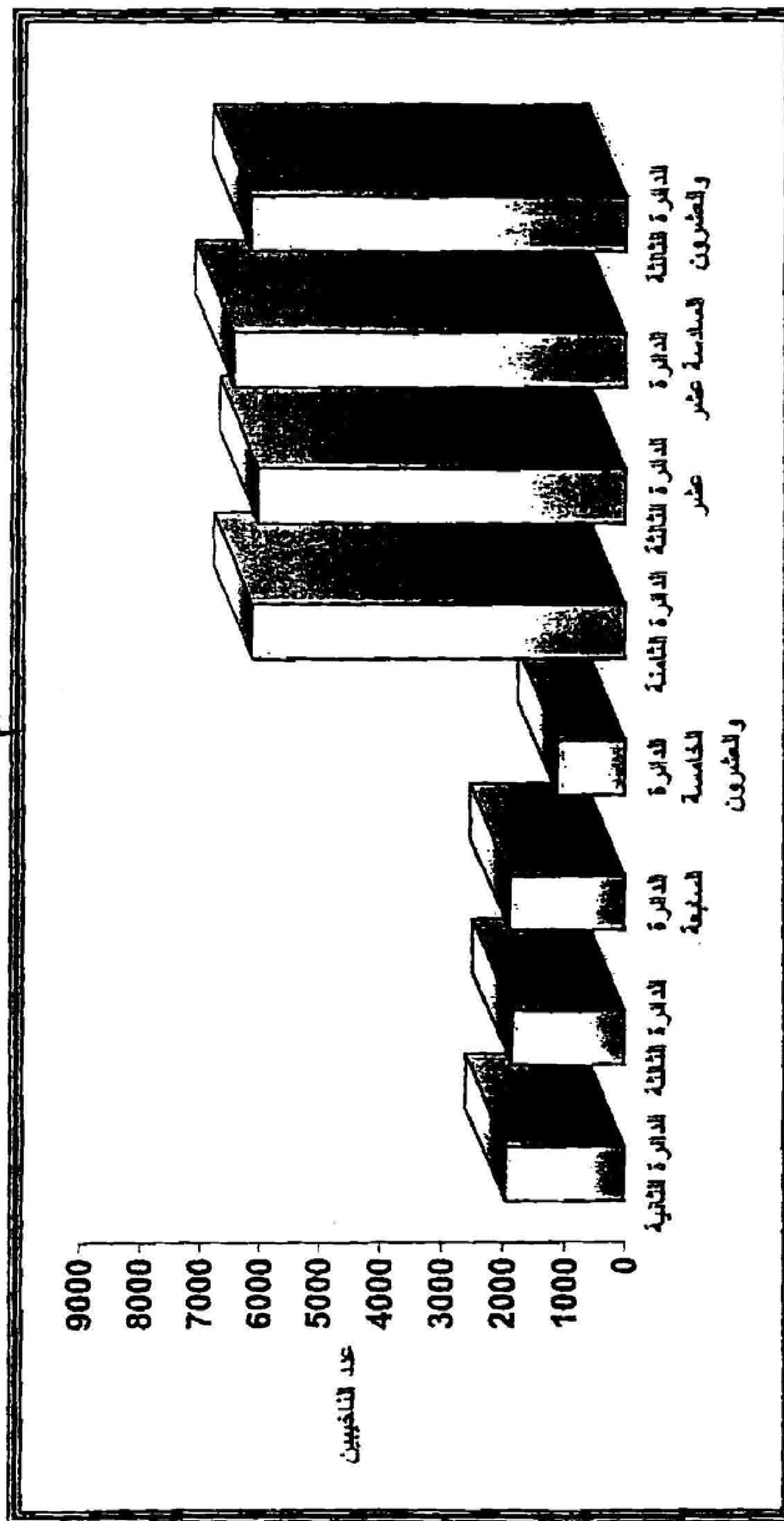


Figure no. 3. Distribution in Some Electoral Districts  
in 1996

شكل (٣) توزيع عدد الناخبين على الدوائر الانتخابية لسنة ١٩٩٦



The second danger was posed by the emergence of an alliance between the tribal and fundamentalist forces. Such danger was largely averted by the government pragmatically appropriating the slogans and the proposals of the fundamentalists, in a series of appeasement policies towards the fundamentalist.

The fundamentalist movement did not take a deeper root in the external tribal districts, contrary to many expectations, than in the urban areas, where it became a vehicle for protest by the urban Kuwaiti lower middle class. In fact in the external tribal districts, voting according to tribal affiliation remained stronger than ideological affiliation to the extent that many candidates from the same tribal and ideological affiliation competed against each other, which proves that the fundamentalist label was simply a cover/or a disguise for a tribal affiliation.

The third and the more worrisome danger to government control came from the relatively free press. On many occasions in the past, especially when the parliament was unconstitutionally dissolved (in 1967, 1976, 1985 and 1989) the government tried to gag the free press for a very good reason. Although the parliamentary opposition was a small minority, their real influence came from the free press which formed, on many occasions, a negative public opinion against government policies. And this afforded the oppositional forces far greater weight than their actual numbers suggested.

After the liberation of Kuwait the majority of the leading dailies and many of the weekly magazines reverted to owners who are loyal to the government or to editors who are strict with their columnists and writers in not allowing unfriendly criticism of the government. In ~~reaching~~ reading this point the government of Kuwait has achieved its goal of tolerating criticism in a cosy environment, in which participatory democracy can, in turn, tolerate curtailment of liberty and constitutional guarantees.

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