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History, Oil, and Ethnicity:

The Story of Abu Musa and the Tunbs Islands

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History, Oil, and Ethnicity: The Story of Abu Musa and the Tunbs Islands

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Abu Musa and the greater and lesser Tunbs¹ are located in the Persian Gulf near its only entrance, the Strait of Hormuz. The largest of these islands, Abu Musa, has a population of around 600 people. Only one of the other two islands, the Greater Tunbs, is inhabited—with a much smaller population of about 350 people. Their civilian populations derive from the Arab tribes of the Coastal Emirates that have occupied both sides of the Strait of Hormuz since the mid-eighteenth century. Since 1971, Iran has maintained military garrisons on all three islands as well. There are few significant resources on the islands outside of red oxide and oil, and only Abu Musa can accommodate large ships. Consequently, the islanders' occupations are chiefly maritime: that is, fishing, shipping and pearling.

Abu Musa and the Tunbs are significant, however, because they are a focal point for regional

conflicts: whoever controls them can control Persian Gulf shipping and potentially 65 percent of the world's energy supplies. The rival claims of Iran and the Qasimi Sheikhdoms of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah (two Emirates of the United Arab Emirates) to Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands are more than a century old and have defied attempts at resolution. Outside powers such as the United States also have taken a keen interest in the fate of the three islands because the Persian Gulf holds two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves and more than a third of the proven natural gas reserves.² Indeed, Abu Musa and the Tunbs are notoriously unstable and have the potential to propel the international community into political and economic crisis.

This paper will examine the forces that have pushed Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands onto the international stage in the late twentieth century. The

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opening pages revisit the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Iranian-Arab conflicts over the Islands. Great Britain figures importantly in these struggles because it was the region's dominant colonial power and adopted positions that legitimized both sides of this regional rivalry. Equally important was Britain's inability in the 1930s to resolve the problem it had spawned, which would help shape the course of events after Britain's withdrawal in 1971. The United States also influenced events in the Gulf, particularly after the 1979 Iranian revolution. The rise of the oil industry and Arab-Iranian rivalries factor into the argument as well. The paper concludes with a discussion of the events of August 1992 and the possibility of future confrontations over control of the three islands.

It is the potential seriousness of future confrontations that make the history of Abu Musa and the Tunbs worthy of study. The three islands, like the Spratley Islands in the South China Sea, occupy a strategic maritime position within a region that is vital to the world economy. Because of that strategic position, any conflict over the islands would draw the attention of the great powers, especially the United States. The probability of such a conflict has been heightened in recent years by the enormous sums of money spent by the region's governments on armaments and the deepening political rift between Washington and Tehran. Any attempt to alter the status quo (or appearance of such an attempt) could very easily set off an intense conflict. Realistically, the best way to preserve the peace may be to ensure that all sides abide by the 1971 Memorandum of Understanding, which pragmatically accommodates both Iran's and the U.A.E.'s claims to the Islands.

ORIGINS

Like many of the region's other disputed territories, Abu Musa illustrates the legacy of Great Britain's imperial presence in the Persian Gulf.

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That presence began in the seventeenth century, when British merchants helped the Safavid Empire to expel the Portuguese from the Persian Gulf port of Hormuz and to create Bandar 'Abbas as a new port for Persian-Indian ocean trade. Over the next two centuries, the British East Indian Company developed a profitable trade in eastern spices and luxury goods at Bandar 'Abbas and came to dominate the Persian Gulf's economy.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Great Britain's interests in the Gulf began to change from economic to political and strategic. Particularly after Britain established a dominant position in northwest India in 1820,³ British officials sought to expand their nation's influence in the Persian Gulf to protect the trade routes to India. But the Qasimi, who inhabited the southeast portion of the Arabian peninsula (including Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands) as well as parts of Southern Iran, were an obstacle to Britain's expansion.⁴

They had controlled all shipping in the Persian Gulf since 1780 and regularly raided British shipping, attacking even armed merchant ships.⁵

To deal with this problem, the Governor of Bombay, Sir Edward Neapon, dispatched a fleet under Major General William Grant Keir to subdue the Qasimi in 1819. A year later, Keir defeated the Qasami tribes and forced them to agree to the General Treaty of 1820, which prohibited piracy and slavery.⁶ From this foothold in the Arabian Peninsula, the British extended their influence along the eastern coast of the Gulf to Kuwait. Ten years later, the British disregarded strong protests from the Iranian government and established a base at Basiduon, the island of Qeshm, in the Strait of Hormuz.⁷

By the early 1890s, British officials looked at the Persian Gulf as a "British Lake," much like the Indian Ocean. A series of treaties with the Trucial States⁸—the ancestors of Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates—in the 1880s

and 1890s buttressed Britain's position and gave it virtually a free hand in determining the affairs of the region. As historian Rosemarie Said Zahlan writes,

[Great Britain did not], in applying its policy, have to pay much regard to public opinion: because of the strong control it exercised over the area, news of events there wasn't likely to reach any further than the desks of Delhi or London; the military weakness of sheiks made them irrelevant in terms of power politics; and there was still no sign of oil on the coast, and, thus of the area's acquiring economic importance.⁹

These officials therefore had no reason to establish precedents or follow consistent policies. All that mattered was protecting British interests and ensuring that other foreign powers such as France, Germany, the Ottoman Empire or Russia did not challenge Britain's predominant position in the region.

Britain's strategy for defending its interests, however, had repercussions that extended far beyond the questions of international power and influence in the nineteenth century. Throughout its presence in the Gulf, Britain's power was unrivaled, and consequently its decisions began to shape the destiny of the region's conflicts, including the question of sovereignty over Abu Musa and the Tunbs Islands. British decisions concerning these three islands were especially important because neither the Iranian nor the Qasimi tribesmen possessed the documents necessary to prove that they decisively controlled Abu Musa or the Tunbs islands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus, Britain's administration clouded an already ambiguous situation and fueled a conflict that would continue into the twentieth century.

Not surprisingly, Iran justified its attempts to control Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands in the 1880s and the early 1900s by asserting that Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands were under Iranian sovereignty before Britain "took" them in 1820.

Iranians argued that throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most notably in 1737 and again in 1768, successive governments in Tehran conquered the Qasimi of southern Iran who controlled the islands and most of the waters of the Gulf.¹⁰ Iran therefore had sovereignty over all the islands in the Persian Gulf, including those in the Strait of Hormuz. As a result, the Iranian government vehemently protested the establishment of Britain's supply depot at Basidu in 1832.¹¹

Equally important to the Iranians' argument were British documents that appeared to support Iran's claim to sovereignty over the islands from 1878 to 1887. The British Residency at Bushire repeatedly noted in official memoranda that the Qasimi of southern Iran had become vassals of the Shah of Iran and ruled over Abu Musa, the Tunbs and Sirri islands in this capacity.¹² The Iranians also noted that British officials were aware that taxes collected on these islands often were used to pay tribute to the Iranian Governor-General of the Fars Province. Throughout that period, British maps, including one given by Britain's Secretary of State to the Shah in 1888, showed all the islands in the Strait of Hormuz—Sirri, Qeshm, Abu Musa and the Tunbs—in Iranian colors. Even after this period, the Viceroy of India's map of Persia (1892) and the Survey of India map (1897) showed these islands in Iranian colors.¹³ Indeed, Britain did not object to Iran's decision to annex the island of Sirri in 1888.¹⁴

The Qasimi responded to Iran's claims by arguing that Iran had no ancestral claim to the three islands. They even produced documents in 1879 and 1900 that firmly established their right to administer the three islands. These leaders also reminded the British that the latter had recognized Qasimi sovereignty over the islands as early as 1872. British documents appeared to confirm this position since they indicated that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "the islands of [Tunbs] and Abu Musa, like the neighboring Arab coast, have been in the possession and effective occupation of the ruling [Qasimi] sheikhs."¹⁵

Moreover, the Qasimi argued that British officials did not understand the true nature of the po-

litical arrangement on Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands, and claimed that the Tunbs were jointly administered by the Qasimi living both in Iran and in the Trucial States between 1887-1888. Both groups regarded the Tunbs as communal property that did not belong to a particular tribal leader; in fact, Abu Musa was actually governed by the Qasimi tribes in the Trucial States.¹⁶ Thus, despite outward appearances, Tehran's power in the region was tenuous at best. In addition, even if the Sheikh of Lingah had ruled the islands in his capacity as a Persian vassal, it would not have eliminated the legacy of more than a century of Arab administration of the islands.

At the turn of the century, however, British leaders formally accepted Qasimi arguments and used the full weight of their nation's authority to insure Qasimi sovereignty over the three islands. The reason for this shift in policy was very simple: there was a growing rivalry between Germany and Russia for control of the Middle East. British officials now felt that the only way to maintain British predominance in the region was to defend the claims of its client states to territories that might be valuable to rival powers. Britain therefore reacted swiftly with threats of massive naval bombardment of Iranian cities when Belgian employees of the Iranian customs service attempted to establish customs stations on both the Tunbs and Abu Musa in 1904. A year later Britain erected a lighthouse on the Tunbs island as a permanent reminder of its imperial presence.¹⁷

Britain's policy grew somewhat more conciliatory at the close of the First World War. Under the new "mandate" system of the League of Nations, France and Great Britain divided the Middle East into separate spheres of influence. France controlled Syria and the Levant, while England administered Palestine, Egypt and the Persian Gulf. No longer would British policy makers have to worry about an encroaching Germany, Ottoman Empire, or Imperial Russia. At about the same time, vast oil deposits were discovered in the region and Great Britain swiftly established its right to be the sole exploiter of this new resource. But the issue of oil exploration would not become important

until later in the 1930s. All Britain wished to do in the 1920s and the early 1930s was to guarantee the status quo. Of course that meant convincing Iran, the one independent state with access to the Persian Gulf, to support Britain's efforts.¹⁸

The main obstacle to winning Iranian support, however, was precisely the question of Abu Musa and the Tunbs. The status of the three islands was an especially important symbol of progress and national prestige to the government of Reza Khan Shah, which sought to transform Iran into a modern nation state that could defend its vital interests abroad. British reports regularly detailed Iranian army officers' desire to retake the islands from Britain.¹⁹ This meant that the Iranian government had to re-open the question of the islands' sovereignty to fulfill its own domestic rhetoric.

Iran raised the issue before the League of Nations in 1923 and began to interfere with the customs operations on Abu Musa two years later. At the same time, Reza Shah's government stressed to British authorities that there was room for compromise. In 1920, the Iranian Minister of Court, Monsieur Taimourtache, indicated that his nation would be willing to drop its claims to Abu Musa if Britain recognized Iran's claim to the Tunbs. Other ideas included exchanging Iran's claim to Bahrain for the Trucial States' claim to Abu Musa, or leasing the smaller Tunbs island to Iran. Toward the end of the 1920s, Britain, encouraged by these suggestions, proposed a comprehensive treaty that would resolve the question of the islands, as well as several other disputes. A solution to the question of sovereignty over the Gulf islands appeared to be a reality.²⁰

In May of 1928, the two governments reached a verbal agreement to preserve the status quo: Abu Musa and the Tunbs would be left under Arab sovereignty.²¹ This agreement was subsequently incorporated into the 1929 draft treaty, but became contested a year later when Britain refused to consider Iran's claim to other Gulf islands.²² Taimourtache still wanted to compromise, however, and offered to recognize Britain's claim to Abu Musa if Britain could convince the Sheikh of Ras al-Khaimah to lease the Tunbs to Iran.²³

Britain's political representative in the Gulf, however, sympathized with the Arabs, and consequently did not press the Sheikh hard enough to win a leasing agreement acceptable to the Iranian Government.²⁴

In the late 1930s, the Admiralty also began to raise an issue that would become extremely important later in the century: access to Gulf oil. It insisted that the islands remain in Arab hands, so Britain could be sure that the Tunbs "would not fall into such hands as would threaten the oil supply in time of difficulty."²⁵ After Mexico nationalized its oil fields in 1937, the Foreign Office grudgingly concurred that Arab sovereignty had to be maintained.²⁶ Further compromise on the status of the islands was now impossible. Britain would therefore have to guarantee Arab sovereignty over the islands indefinitely.

The sense of grievance and self-righteousness on both sides continued to grow in the years after the Second World War when the older resentments of the imperial-age became intertwined with new tensions and ideas, including Arab nationalism and the rising expectations of profits from oil sales. British officials, for their part, systematically ignored these problems and principally worked to ensure the free flow of oil to the rest of the world. They also ensured that there was no open hostility between the Iranians and the Arabs over the two islands. As long as Britain maintained an imperial presence, hostilities were suppressed. But the resentment held in check by British ambivalence would come back to haunt them when they announced plans to withdraw from the region in 1968.

1971 AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CONFLICT

In the years after the Second World War, a series of global and regional changes thrust the question of sovereignty of Abu Musa and the Tunbs onto the international stage and exposed the tensions that British officials had long tried to ignore. The most important of these changes was the erosion of Britain's absolute economic and political power within the Persian Gulf. This became especially apparent in the late 1960s, when Britain's

economy deteriorated so rapidly that London once had to devalue sterling from \$2.80 to \$2.50 in a single day. Britain no longer had the resources to maintain its old empire against fierce competition from the United States and Japan for control of the increasingly important oil industry.²⁷

The British also had ideological and diplomatic reasons to withdraw from the Gulf. Britain's diplomats found that their position in the Gulf was a political liability that damaged their nation's international reputation in both the Arab World and within the United Nations. Within Britain there also was an increasing "ideological aversion to the practice of empire,"²⁸ especially within the ruling Labour Party. Few in Britain were greatly concerned or upset in April of 1968 when the government announced its plan to withdraw from the Gulf by 1971.

The changes to Britain's empire in the Persian Gulf were mirrored by vast changes in the politics of the Middle East in the years following the Second World War. The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the Suez Crisis eight years later marked the end of the Mandate Period and the beginning of the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The central figure in both conflicts was President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser of Egypt, who led the Arab crusade against Israel and hoped to focus pan-Arab sentiment on liberating the Arab homeland—including Abu Musa and the Tunbs—and ending the West's domination of the Middle East.

Arab nationalism had a particularly devastating effect in the Persian Gulf because it blended "new" political conflicts with centuries-old ethnic and religious conflicts between Persians, Arabs, Sunnis and Shi'is.²⁹ Arab nationalists looked upon the Persian Gulf as a bastion of Western influence and Gulf regimes "as Western surrogates who wasted valuable petro-dollars that should have gone to Arab development."³⁰ Iran, a close ally of both Israel and the West at this time, was therefore viewed by Arab nationalists as "the principal obstacle to realizing their objectives."³¹ These views were important because they enlarged the number of people who might become involved in a potential conflict. Indeed, disputes over Abu Musa and

the Tunbs would no longer be confined to Britain, Iran and two small Gulf sheikhdoms; they would now include the rest of the Arab world.

Equally as dramatic was the effect of the oil industry on the Gulf states. "Between 1950 and 1970 worldwide fossil fuel quadrupled, especially the production of oil, the most useful and easily transported of all energy sources."³² Home to two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves, the Persian Gulf quickly shed its image as a backwater region. Billions of dollars poured into the region and vastly enriched the formerly penniless Gulf states. They in turn became key players in the world economy by virtue of their membership in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC. In addition, their wealth allowed them to adopt a limited degree of autonomy from Britain and to assume a much greater role than had previously been thought possible in determining the eventual terms of their independence.³³

Like the Gulf states, Iran was strongly affected by Arab nationalism and the dramatic increase in the demand for oil. In the early 1960s, Reza Shah Pahlavi successfully negotiated better relations with his traditional foe, the Soviet Union, so that his nation could project its power into the Persian Gulf. He felt this was the only way to protect Iran's vulnerable coast line (the longest of any state bordering the Persian Gulf) and to ward off subversion from hostile Arab states such as Yemen and Egypt.³⁴ Equally important in Pahlavi's eyes was the question of free transit through the Strait of Hormuz—Iran's only way to ship oil to the outside world. To make this new role possible, Iranian government officials proposed to use the dollars from increased oil revenues³⁵ to rapidly modernize Iran's military and to transform it into a substantial regional power.

Not surprisingly, the Shah funnelled these strategic and political interests into the old question of who controlled Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands. His government's military planners feared that once the British withdrew in 1971, the Sheikhs who controlled Abu Musa and the Tunbs would not be strong enough to protect the islands from hostile powers in times of war. Such weakness would be

disastrous because any power which controlled these islands could easily interdict all the shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, and attack cities and oil installations in Iran's southern and southwestern provinces.³⁶ These fears were confounded by the fact that all the members of CENTO,³⁷ particularly the United States, had not aided Pakistan against Indian attacks in both 1965 and 1971.³⁸ It would therefore be imperative for Iran to fill the vacuum left by Britain's withdrawal and to seize control of the islands.

The Shah also knew that any dispute over the control of the Strait of Hormuz would have international ramifications because the United States viewed the stability of the Persian Gulf as paramount to its national security. Engaged in an unpopular war in Southeast Asia, American policy makers felt that they were in no position to fill the void left by the departing British. And even if they had been, they tended to shy away from direct intervention, arguing that an American presence would be construed as a new form of colonialism and would present a golden opportunity for Nasser's Egypt or Soviet-backed Marxists to topple the newly independent and presumably pro-Western regimes in the Gulf.

Iran provided a natural alternative. Throughout the 1960s, Iran's military staged impressive maritime exercises within the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean. The Shah had strong ties with Israel and did not participate in the 1968 oil embargo against the West. Beginning a policy that would later be known as the Nixon Doctrine, the United States agreed in 1969 to supply large amounts of the most advanced weapons to Iran and Saudi Arabia to ensure stability and to keep the Soviets out of the Persian Gulf.³⁹ Indeed, Iran was now in a stronger position than it had ever been, and the Shah saw no reason to compromise with the British on the matter of the islands as his father had done in the 1930s.

The three islands would prove to be a formidable stumbling block to Britain's withdrawal from the region. Ever since the government had announced plans to withdraw British forces in 1968, Britain's principal objective in the Persian Gulf had

been to secure a viable future for each of the Gulf states. Whitehall's top negotiator, Sir William Luce, successfully won recognition for Oman and Qatar, and had even convinced the Shah to renounce his old claim to Bahrain. Luce had a much more difficult time, however, winning recognition for the union of the seven sheikhdoms on the Trucial Coast (what Luce referred to as the "Union Initiative"), particularly after the Sheikh of Sharjah granted oil concessions over Abu Musa and its territorial waters to a Crescent Petroleum⁴⁰ (implying Arab sovereignty over the island).⁴¹

The Shah vehemently opposed these concessions and "was adamant that no such union would be permitted unless and until his demands for Abu Musa and the Tunbs were satisfied."⁴² Britain had damaged Iranian pride too many times in the past over the sovereignty of these islands, and he had no intention of letting it happen again. The Shah also felt that his support of Bahrain's independence granted him automatic entitlement to the islands. In October 1970, Iran's foreign minister, Ardeshir Zahedi, made the Shah's feelings clear when he proclaimed: "Iran will never abandon her legal rights to sovereignty of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, and unless these rights are completely recognized there can be no peace and security in the Persian Gulf."⁴³

These pronouncements presented an enormous dilemma for Luce and his government. An open clash with Iran seemed undesirable for three distinct reasons: Iran could inflict considerable damage on Britain and the Trucial States' interests; any clash would obstruct the implementation of a new regional security agreement; and all of Britain's allies in NATO supported Iran's position. On the other hand, collusion with Iran would show that Britain's protection was worthless, and its influence in the Seven States would consequently vanish. This in turn would eliminate Britain's ability to promote the Union Initiative, with the result that the Trucial States' vast oil resources would be up for grabs once Britain left.⁴⁴

The decisive factor, however, may have been the opinion of Britain's closest ally, the United States. Initially, the British hoped that the United

States would use its enormous military and political power to convince the Shah to abandon his claim to Abu Musa and the Tunbs. Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the British Foreign Secretary, repeatedly asked the Nixon administration to do just that throughout 1971. But President Nixon, who had been a close friend of the Shah since the 1950s, refused to become involved in the dispute, which did not bode well for any British attempt to challenge the Shah by force. Indeed, Luce and his colleagues could not forget that their nation had paid dearly in 1956 when it had intervened in the Suez Crisis without approval from Washington.⁴⁵

Britain's top representative in the Persian Gulf therefore chose the only option he felt would secure the future of the union before Britain withdrew: collaboration. This seemed to be a "lesser evil" than withdrawing from the Persian Gulf without a settlement and the blessings of the United States. Luce and Sir William warned the leaders of the Trucial States that their government would not defend the islands in the case of Iranian occupation and advised them to negotiate with the Shah. In late November 1971, the Ruler of Sharjah agreed to a "memorandum of understanding" which allowed both sides to maintain their claim to the island and to fly their respective flags there. Iran agreed to pay the Sharjah \$3.75 million annually until revenue from oil drilled on the island, or in its offshore waters, reached \$7 million (subsequent oil revenues were to be split evenly). The island was divided evenly, and each ruler retained absolute control over his area. Furthermore, Crescent retained exclusive rights to explore for oil on both sides of Abu Musa. No such agreement existed for the Tunbs, however, because Sheikh Ras al-Khaimah refused all Iranian offers of military and political assistance.⁴⁶

Despite al-Khaimah intransigence, the Shah had already made his decision to occupy the islands. On October 30—a day before Britain's mandate expired—Iranian military forces occupied half of Abu Musa and the rest of the Tunbs. Not surprisingly, Ras al-Khaimah ordered his police force on the Tunbs to resist the invading Iranians, and several police officers and Iranian soldiers were

killed when the Iranian Army landed. The Shah hoped his forces would occupy the islands before the Union of Trucial States—soon to be called the United Arab Emirates—was recognized by the United Nations, and that the U.N. would therefore recognize Iran's sovereignty over the islands.⁴⁷

Most Arab states vehemently condemned both Iran and Britain, especially after Luce announced a billion-pound arms deal with the Shah just days after the invasion. Iraq, for example, immediately severed ties to both Tehran and London. General Muammar al-Qaddafi nationalized British Petroleum's interests in Libya and handed them over to a newly formed Arab Gulf Exploration Company. Throughout the old Trucial States, youths threw stones at Iranian banks and other institutions.⁴⁸ Algeria, Iraq, Libya and South Yemen brought the dispute to the United Nations Security Council, and in December the Arab league called upon the Secretary General of the United Nations to persuade Iran to reconsider.

The Secretary General responded to these calls by sending his Assistant Secretary for Political Affairs to the Persian Gulf to investigate the problem. After a series of interviews and a long official report, the United Nations concluded that there was not much it could do.⁴⁹ Neither superpower was interested in compelling Iran to evacuate the islands, and the Shah was certainly not going to leave of his own accord. Ultimately, most countries came to accept Iran's sovereignty over the islands as permanent.

Although the "Memorandum of Understanding" offered tangible benefits to both sides, it would soon seem inadequate in the face of the historical resentments on the one hand and the rapidly changing balance of power on the other. Iran saw the agreement as temporary—a way to appease the British—and would later argue that it had full sovereignty over the two islands. Arabs were horrified by the image of the Iranian Army crushing Ras al-Khaimah's defiant police force and were determined not to allow it to happen again. These grievances blended with much older ethnic and religious enmities to transform the dispute into something larger than a simple question of sov-

eignty. America's estrangement from Iran following the 1979 revolution further altered the situation and allowed the Gulf states to take even tougher stands against Iran, confident of American support. This in turn made the dispute even more serious when it resurfaced in the late 1970s and again in 1992.

FROM 1979 TO THE PRESENT

Although they remained troubled by the events of 1971 and resented Iran's newly enlarged role, the Gulf Sheikdoms grew to accept Iranian power in the Gulf throughout the 1970s. For many of these states, a "Pax Iranica" was not much different than a "Pax Britannica," and they appreciated the Shah's decisive interventions against forces that threatened the security of all the conservative Gulf Sheikhs along the Gulf.⁵⁰ They also recognized that the Shah's armed forces guaranteed the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. But this order collapsed in 1979, when the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his fellow clerics toppled the Shah's regime and established the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Initially, the Gulf countries cautiously welcomed Iran's new government. They were particularly pleased with the new Defense Minister, Seyed Ahmad Madani, who formally rejected Iranian nationalism and announced that his nation "no longer wished to be the gendarme of the Persian Gulf." He also canceled all military orders, paid or unpaid, and transferred Iran's enormous Indian Ocean navy base, Chah-Bahar, to the Southern Fishery Company.⁵¹ Other officials assured the Gulf States that Iran did not have any designs on their independence, integrity, or even their wealth. President Rajii was even quoted as saying that Iran's Islamic Republic would reconsider the question of sovereignty over the islands of Tunbs and Abu Musa.⁵² Indeed, many in the Gulf states now hoped Abu Musa and the Tunbs would be soon restored to Arab sovereignty.

These hopes were soon dashed by the increasingly radical tone of the regime. Iranian officials now actively promoted the revolution's ideas to Gulf Shi'is and urged them to copy Iran's example.

Religion in turn allowed the regime to fulfill Iranians' deep desire to retain their ancestral claims. The Ayatollah Sadegh Rouhani, combined these two messages perfectly when he threatened to annex Bahrain unless the island's rulers adopted a more Islamic form of government (his message appeared to be particularly frightening after Shiia riots rocked the Gulf states from 1979 to 1982). And in fact, while many Iranians opposed the Shah's activist Persian Gulf policy, they did not doubt the legitimacy of Iran's claims to any of the islands in the Gulf, including Abu Musa and the Tunbs.⁵³

The radicalization of the Iranian revolution also surprised the United States. The Carter administration had weathered the crisis that led to the downfall of the Shah remarkably well⁵⁴ and had even retained influence in the new government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan.⁵⁵ But President Carter and his advisors had a much more difficult time addressing the international implications of the revolution after fifty-two Americans were taken hostage in the U. S. Embassy in Tehran in early November of 1979. This event signaled to American officials that Iran was quickly becoming a hostile power that could threaten their nation's vital interests in the Persian Gulf and in the Strait of Hormuz. Equally alarming was the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan two months later. To meet these two concerns, the administration announced that any attempt to win control over the Persian Gulf would be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States and "would be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."⁵⁶ This new policy soon became known as the Carter Doctrine.

President Carter's new doctrine represented a significant departure from the United States' policy in the Persian Gulf throughout the 1970s. The U.S. government now viewed the security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Sheikdoms as vitally linked to its own. Never again would it permit another power to take their territory by force, as Iran had done in 1971. This in turn put the Arabs in a much stronger position since it compelled the United States, much like Britain before it, to

support them in any border dispute with Iran. Thus, the U.S. government would be intricately involved in any future sovereignty disputes over Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands.

Sensing Iran's weakened position, the Gulf states gradually took a tougher line toward Iran. When Iraq invaded Iran in the fall of 1980, they sided with Saddam Hussein's government, which had prudently cited the liberation of Abu Musa and the Tunbs Islands as one of its principal war aims. In May of 1981, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain formed the Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional security alliance.⁵⁷ The Council members portrayed their organization as a first step toward a broader Arab economic and political organization.⁵⁸ Many of these states also provided millions of dollars in aid to the Iraqi-war effort and consistently refused to consider Iran's demand that Iraq be condemned for its aggression. For Iran, the message was clear: only Sunni Arabs would participate in the economic and political life of the Persian Gulf region.

Not surprisingly, Iran did not take a positive view of the G.C.C. and chastised other Gulf regimes for not defending "true Islam."⁵⁹ It continued to spread propaganda to Shi'ia communities with the hope of convincing the Gulf regimes to end their support of Iraq. Iran also continued to respect the provisions of the "Memorandum of Understanding," but over time it also asserted greater sovereignty over the two islands. Beginning in 1983, Iranian Army patrols in the United Arab Emirates controlled part of Abu Musa and became a regular feature of daily life on the island. Four years later, Iranian soldiers used a rumor of a Qasimi coup in Sharjah as an excuse to move into the southern part of Abu Musa and to lower the Sharjah flag. When news reached the island that the coup had been foiled, Iranian soldiers quickly re-hoisted the flag and returned to their positions.⁶⁰

In the early 1990s, Iranians became particularly concerned about visits by non-Sharjah nationals, and even went so far as to arrest a Dutch sailor in July of 1991 for carrying a flare-gun. Not surprisingly, in January of the following year, Iranian

authorities suggested that they issue security passes to all non-nationals visiting Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands. This proposal was not well received by the government of the United Arab Emirates, which did not want to change any part of the Memorandum of Understanding.⁶¹ A clash of interests seemed almost inevitable.

The crisis began in April 1992 and worsened in August of that year. Following the first Gulf War, Iran hoped that it could forge a regional alliance with the G.C.C. against Iraq and render American intervention unnecessary. The Islamic Republic hoped this alliance would also bring the subsidies it needed to finance Iran's post-war reconstruction and development. Unfortunately, these attempts were all but scuttled by the dispute over the islands.⁶²

In April, the regional Iranian military commander on Abu Musa barred a group of Asian laborers and Egyptian Arab teachers from entering the island. Because this attempt came only two months after the visit of Iran's president, Hojatt al-Islam Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, Sharjah authorities worried that Iran was about to revoke the 1971 agreement. These fears were heightened by comments made by Iran's envoy to the United Nations, Kamal Kharrazi, who implied that only those Sharjah nationals with a proven connection to the island would be allowed to stay there.⁶³ Iranian foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, quickly defused the crisis at the end of April by reassuring nervous Sharjah officials that nothing had changed and that the military commander had simply misinterpreted the language of the Memorandum.⁶⁴

Four months later, however, the Iranian military barred another ship carrying foreign nationals from entering the islands. Iranian officials now demanded that all "non-Sharjah residents produce Iranian permits and that all foreigners intending to land on Abu Musa should advise the Iranian authorities in advance." This time the United Arab Emirates, acting on behalf of the Sharjah, demanded that the 1971 Memorandum of Understanding be renegotiated along with the status of the Tunbs islands. The G.C.C. backed the U.A.E. claims on 9 September with a strongly-worded

statement that categorically rejected Iran's occupation of the three islands and declared "its absolute support for all measures that the U.A.E. might take to affirm its sovereignty over [Abu Musa and the Tunbs]."⁶⁵ It also strongly urged the U.A.E. to lodge a complaint against Iran before the United Nation's Security Council.⁶⁶

The Iranian government responded by taking every measure possible to defuse the dispute with the U.A.E. over Abu Musa, especially after the United States and the Arab League expressed strong support for the U.A.E.'s position.⁶⁷ Rafsanjani claimed that the measures were instituted after Iran caught armed strangers on the island, and he insisted that his nation wanted a peaceful settlement. Velayati reinforced Rafsanjani's words by replacing the island's governor and dispatching a senior investigation team from the Iranian Foreign Ministry to investigate the events of April and August. He also admitted at least some responsibility for the crisis itself.⁶⁸ Others in Iran, such as Ali Hussein Khamene'i,⁶⁹ blamed the West and argued that the occupation of the islands provided a good deterrent to the United States.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the government's conciliatory comments were rewarded in November when Oman offered to mediate the dispute.

But the talks broke down almost before they began. Confident of widespread international support, the U.A.E. insisted early on in negotiations that Iran should relinquish sovereignty over the three islands and end its military occupation there. Not surprisingly, the Islamic Republic rejected this idea. The Iranian Government's chief negotiator, Mustafa Haeri Foumani, refused "to negotiate with others on the sovereignty of Iran's own land." He then blamed the United States⁷¹ for inflaming the dispute to justify its continued presence in the Gulf.⁷²

Indeed, the United States was a key force, although indirectly, in the short-lived negotiations. American policy makers supported the U.A.E.'s position and even used "Voice of America" editorials to criticize Iran's actions on Abu Musa and the Tunbs.⁷³ The United States also retained a military force in the region large enough to force Iran's

withdrawal from the islands. But U.S. policy makers did not choose to use or threaten to use the military option, as it had done in Kuwait, and therefore ensured that the conflict would remain a war of words⁷⁴ (the Gulf states were simply not in a good position to fight a war against Iran without U.S. support). The Bush administration was facing a strong electoral challenge from Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas and did not want the distraction of another international crisis in the Persian Gulf.⁷⁵ Once again, the United States' inaction ensured that the Memorandum of Understanding would govern life on Abu Musa and the Tunbs.

Contrary to American expectations, the war of words continued and even intensified in December of 1992. At the closing of the 13th Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, the G.C.C. issued a statement that condemned Iran's actions and called on the "Islamic Republic of Iran to abolish all measures taken on Abu Musa island and to terminate its occupation of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs islands, which belong to the U.A.E."⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, Rafsanjani responded with strong language of his own. Twelve days after the G.C.C.'s statement, he warned that "Iran is surely stronger than the likes of you...to reach these islands one has to cross a sea of blood," and added that "Iran considers this claim to be totally invalid."⁷⁷

Ultimately, Rafsanjani was incorrect in his assessment of Iran's strength in relation to the G.C.C. The dispute over Abu Musa and the Tunbs showed the rest of the world that Iran was not the dominant player in the Persian Gulf, even with Iraq under stiff U.N. sanctions. Since the 1979 Revolution, the Gulf states had increased their military capabilities and were now relatively equal to Iran. Each side was strong enough to threaten the other convincingly, but neither was in a strong enough position on its own to impose its will on the other. The decisive force was the United States, and its decisions not to use military force bodes well for the future of the Memorandum of Understanding. As Richard Schofield notes in the *Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States*, "it is difficult, realistically, to envisage an arrangement that improves on the 1971 Memorandum of Understanding's

pragmatic accommodation of rival Iranian and Qasimi claims to the sovereignty of Abu Musa."⁷⁸

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE

To this day, the war of words continues over Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands. Although there have not been any incidents or clashes to match those of 1992, the conflict remains an important focus of regional rivalries. The early history of the dispute remains unclear, and both sides have a strong incentive to distort the historical record. This fact alone may help to explain why historians such as A.O. Tarryman, Richard Burell, and Richard Schofield can look at the same set of British memoranda and tell very different stories. Ultimately, the only viable solution may be, as Richard Schofield repeatedly notes, the 1971 Memorandum of Understanding.

That Memorandum marked the final legacy of Britain's 150-year presence in the Gulf. Throughout that period, Britain was the Persian Gulf's pre-eminent colonial power and fought German, Ottoman and Russian attempts to gain a foothold in the region. British officials recognized the islands' potential for controlling Gulf shipping, but they opened a Pandora's box of problems in trying to determine who actually controlled the islands prior to Britain's own arrival. Fearful that its rivals might quickly annex these islands, Britain decisively supported the Arab claim at the turn of the century. That decision infuriated the Iranians and would have a dramatic affect on the events of 1971, where Reza Shah Pahlavi was willing to go to war to insure that his nation gained control of the islands.

Equally important was the impact of the oil industry that Britain introduced to the Persian Gulf in the early 1900s. That industry brought tremendous wealth to the Persian Gulf and provided the arms and prestige necessary to transform both Iran and the Gulf states into regional powers. This in turn has escalated—and thus somewhat changed the nature of—the international conflict over the islands. No longer would disputes be confined to Britain, Iran and two small Gulf sheikhdoms; they would now have to include the rest of the Arab world as well as the United States and its allies.

Thus, the oil industry has thrust an intense ethnic conflict onto the international stage.

Just how to contain that conflict continues to challenge governments both inside and outside of the region. Because all the powers in the region are roughly equal, the United States will most likely be the deciding force in any future conflict over the islands. Indeed, when disputes over the islands became serious in both 1971 and 1992, the U.S. pragmatically prevented the battle of words from becoming a shooting war.

Future American administrations, however, may not choose to follow such a pragmatic policy. Over the last four years, the United States and Iran have drifted into a deeper confrontation. The United States asserts that Iran is undermining the peace process by developing weapons of mass destruction and by supporting terrorism around the world. American officials, such as National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, go so far as to refer to Iran as rogue state. Iran counters that the United States only wishes to dominate the Persian Gulf, support Israel's imperial ambitions and overthrow the Islamic Republic. In addition, both major political parties in the United States believe that a tough policy against Iran will appeal to the voters. The danger is that this harsh rhetoric may compel a future administration to intervene militarily in a conflict over Abu Musa and the Tunbs in order to avoid damaging domestic criticism. Were that to happen, the international community would indeed find itself in the midst of a serious political and economic crisis.

References

¹ There are several different ways to spell the name of this island. I have chosen to follow the spelling used by *The New York Times*.

² Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, *Political Geography of the Strait of Hormuz*, (London: Geography Department, University of London, 1990), 32.

³ Clive's victory in 1820 marked the establishment of British rule in northeastern India.

⁴ In *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*, Sultan Muhammad Al Qassim, the present Amir of Sharjah, argues that the real

reason for Britain's attack was economic competition. In the late 18th century, he asserts, the Qasimi established a trading station on the island of Kishm off the Persian Coast. The English East India Company had a major interest in the neighboring station which quickly lost a "fair amount on its customs dues and the Qasimi station." Thus, the British attacked "to redress the balance of the loss in customs duties." Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, (London: Unwinn Hyman, 1989), 9.

⁵ Donald Hawley, *The Trucial States* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971), 98-121.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "The History of the Political Geography of the Tunbs and Abu Musa," *The Echo of Iran* 58 (November 1992): 23-25.

⁸ Zahlan, 1989, 9. Negotiated between 1880-1892, these treaties transformed the Trucial States, the sheikdoms that occupied the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula, into protectorates of Great Britain. The agreements barred the rulers of these Sheikdoms from negotiating with any country without the consent of Britain. In addition, the rulers agreed not to cede, sell or lease any part of their territories to any power other than Britain. These concessions would become particularly important when large deposits of oil were discovered in the region at the turn of the century.

⁹ Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1978), 129.

¹⁰ Richard Schofield, "The Borders and Territory in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula During the Twentieth Century," in Richard Schofield, ed., *Territorial Foundations of Persian Gulf States*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 35; F.O. 371/17827.

¹¹ "The History and Political Geography of the Tunbs and Abu Musa," *The Echo of Iran* 58 (November 1992): 23-25.

¹² Telegram from the resident in the Persian Gulf to the Secretary of State for India, 22 August 1928., F.O. 371/13009.

¹³ "On the State of the Island of Tamb, Little Tamb, Abu Musa, and Sirri," confidential memorandum from C. Raymond Parr, Foreign Office, to Lord Cushendan, India Office. 30 August, 1928. F.O. 371/13009.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Persian Claims to Tamb and Abu Musa," memorandum from D.W. Lascelles, Foreign Office, to Mr. Laithwaite, India Office, 4 September 1934. F.O. 371/17827.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Note on the Ownership of Tunbs," memorandum from Mr. Laithwaite, India Office, to Mr. Gilbert, Foreign Office, 14 August 1934. F.O. 371/17827.

¹⁸ Schofield, 34.

¹⁹ F.O. 371/15356 1931, Persia E3067/3067/34 (Annual Report 1930).

²⁰ F.O. 371/13009-13010.

²¹ F.O. 371/13799 1929, Persia E3676/3676/34 (Annual Report 1928). R.M. Burrell, "Britain, Iran and the Persian Gulf: Some Aspects of the Situation in the 1920s and 1930s," in Derek Hopwood, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics*, (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), 173 n. 47.

²² F.O. 371/15356 1931, Persia 36067/3067/34 (Annual Report 1930); Hopwood, 173 n. 48.

²³ F.O. 371/15276 1931, Arabia 390/280/91 (enclosure I).

²⁴ F.O. 371/16852 1933, Arabia E5775/3263/91; Hopwood, 174 n. 54.

²⁵ Hopwood, 182.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ A.O. Taryman, *The Establishment of The United Arab Emirates, 1950-1985* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 66-68.

²⁸ Glen Balfour-Paul, *End of Empire in the Middle East*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 124.

²⁹ The Sunnis and Shi'is are the two principle groups within Islam. Their antagonism date back to the first Islamic civil war in the seventh century, where they backed rival claims to Islam's highest office, the Caliphate. Although there are Shiia communities throughout the Muslim world, Iran is the only country where they are a majority of the population.

³⁰ Rouhollah Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy 1941-1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 421.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Nozar Alaolmoki, *Struggle for Dominance in the Persian Gulf Past, Present and Future Prospects* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 5.

³³ Taryman, 66-68.

³⁴ Arab nationalism complicated Iran's relations with otherwise sympathetic Arab countries throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The Shah believed that the ideology prevented the formation of a regional security organization. Indeed, the only security alliance ever forged among the Gulf States, the Gulf Cooperation Council, does not include Iran.

³⁵ Iran produced 1.7 million barrels-a-day in 1964 and earned \$482 million. Ten years later, Iran produced 6 million barrels-a-day and earned \$21.4 billion. Barry Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 130.

³⁶ Hopwood, 160.

³⁷ CENTO was a mutual defense pact signed by Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the United States in 1959.

³⁸ Mojtahed-Zadeh, 22.

³⁹ The Shah's forces staged maritime maneuvers within an area that included Abu Musa as well as other Arab islands in 1964. Taryman, 46.

⁴⁰ Crescent Petroleum is an American oil company based in California.

⁴¹ Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 119.

⁴² Balfour-Paul, 132-133.

⁴³ Taryman, 153-154.

⁴⁴ Balfour-Paul, 132-133.

⁴⁵ Alam, 412-413. Former Secretary of State Rodgers confirmed this story in a conversation with Asadollah Alam in February of 1975.

⁴⁶ Alam, 185-186.

⁴⁷ Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, *The United Arab Emirates* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978), 280-284.

⁴⁸ Frauke Herad-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (London: Longham, 1982), 366.

⁴⁹ Taryman, 189.

⁵⁰ Maqsd Ul Hasan Nuri, "Regional Military Involvement: A Case Study of Iran Under the Shah," *Pakistan Horizon* 37, no. 4. (1984): 32-45.

⁵¹ Mojtahed-Zadeh, 27-28.

⁵² Ibid., 6.

⁵³ Shireen Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 115.

⁵⁴ For more information on the crisis in American foreign policy during the Iranian revolution, please see Said Amir Arjomand's book, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*.

⁵⁵ This was famously symbolized by the handshake between Bazargan and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski at the conclusion of talks between the two governments in Algiers in 1979.

⁵⁶ Yasumasa Kuroda, "A Structural Analysis of Instability and Conflict in the Gulf," in *The Gulf War and the New World Order: International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), 52-76.

⁵⁷ Hunter, 120.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Mojtahed-Zadeh, 45-46.

⁶⁰ Schofield, 40.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Keith McLachlan, "Hydrocarbons and Iranian policies towards the Gulf States: confrontation and co-operation in island and continental shelf affairs," in Richard Schofield, ed., *Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 225.

⁶³ FBIS-NES-92-076, 20 April 1992.

⁶⁴ McLachlan, 234.

⁶⁵ FBIS-NES-92-176, 10 September 1992

⁶⁶ Yousseem Ibrahim, "Dispute Over Gulf Islands Worsens Iran-Arab Ties," *New York Times* 4 October 1992, 11 (L).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Iran Focus*, November 1992, 3; *Borders and Territories*,

72 n. 162.

⁶⁹ Khamene'i is Iran's spiritual leader.

⁷⁰ FBIS-NES-173, 4 September 1992.

⁷¹ Iranian diplomats in private laid much of the blame for the crisis on the Egyptians. They noted that Cairo blamed Iran for scuttling the 6+2 alliance, which would have brought Egypt and into the G.C.C. and earned it considerable income. The crisis appeared to be the perfect opportunity to scare the Gulf States into agreeing to an alliance against Iran that would provide generous subsidies to Egyptian forces. "The Abu Musa Crisis," *The Echo of Iran* 57, (October 1992): 25.

⁷² Yousseem Ibrahim, "Dispute Over Gulf Islands Worsens Iran-Arab Ties," *New York Times* 4 October 1992, 11 (L).

⁷³ FBIS-NES-92-169, 29 August 1992.

⁷⁴ An Iraqi newspaper, *Al-Qadisiyam*, went so far as to criticize the United States for not using force against Iran as it had done to free Kuwait. FBIS-NES-92-185, 15 September 1992.

⁷⁵ "The Abu Musa Problem: How Was it Created and Where Will it End?" *The Echo of Iran* 57, (October 1992): 24-27.

⁷⁶ *BBC summary of world broadcasts: the Middle East ME/1573/A/7*, 29 December 1992.; *Borders and Territory*, 72 n 164.

⁷⁷ MEES, 11 January 1993, C3; *Borders and Territory*, 72 n. 164.

⁷⁸ Schofield, 41.