

Article

IRAN'S OWNERSHIP OF THE ABU MUSA AND TUNBS ISLANDS: AN INCONTROVERTIBLE HISTORICAL RIGHT

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Abstract: This article provides a historical account of Iran's legitimate sovereignty over the Tunb Islands and Abu Musa (Bu Musa Island) in the Persian Gulf, tracing the origins of the dispute to flawed Qajar-era territorial administration practices and British imperialist ambitions to dominate the region. It chronicles how Britain, either directly or through backing its local puppets, hostilely occupied the islands from the late 19th century to safeguard British interests in the region, vehemently opposing any Iranian foothold through diplomatic pressures and threats of military force. Diplomatic negotiations between Iran and Britain in 1928-29 reached an impasse due to Britain's intransigent stance denying Iran's historical sovereignty. Subsequently, under Britain's Labour government from 1929 onwards, it continued thwarting reasonable resolution, cynically backing the territorial claims of British-protected Arab Sheikhdoms descended from deputies who had previously administered the islands on Iran's behalf. The article asserts this neo-colonial policy was inherited by Arab nationalist voices challenging Iran's ownership over the islands in more recent decades. Ultimately, Iran's sovereignty over its three islands was restored on November 30, 1971, following three years of negotiations with Britain.

Keywords: Three Iranian Islands, Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunbs, Iranian Sovereignty, Britain

1. INTRODUCTION

In the arena of diplomatic warfare, there are always decisive and formidable instruments at hand to defend the legitimate rights of nations and expose the malicious intentions of the biased. This is provided that experienced and capable hands wield those instruments while being fully cognizant of the adversary's weaknesses. However, the recent arguments put forth by Iran's Foreign Minister, Dr.

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This article, penned in 1979, was a response to the unfounded assertions made by the Iraqi ambassador in Damascus regarding Iran's islands, coupled with the weak retort from the Foreign Minister of Iran's interim government. It was initially published in Persian in the October 12, 1979 issue of the Bamdad newspaper.

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Yazdi, in refuting the specious claims of the Iraqis—who attempt to portray Iran's rightful ownership of Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands as a violation of Arab rights—are unfortunately quite ambiguous and equivocal. The following points (which hopefully the relevant authorities at the Foreign Ministry will read carefully) may provide some guiding light for Dr. Yazdi and his advisors, enabling them to tread more assuredly and with surer steps across the treacherous terrain of diplomacy, while demolishing the childish pretexts of the adversary (should the need arise again) with sounder logic. The issue of the three islands in the Persian Gulf (assuming that Britain's hostile occupation over these islands can truly be called an "issue") stems principally from two root causes:

1. The flawed historical practice of delegating the governance of Iranian cities and ports to local chieftains.
2. The machinations of British imperialism to achieve complete control over the Persian Gulf.

2. THE FLAWED PRACTICE OF LEASING GOVERNANCE OF CITIES AND PORTS IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

This reprehensible practice, devoid of political prudence and foresight, that permeated Iranian governance for over two centuries found its darkest expression during the Qajar dynasty's reign of one hundred and fifty years; wherein the governance of some southern Iranian cities and ports was essentially auctioned off like merchandise at an international bidding sale to Iranian or Arab governors (who were Iranian nationals) offering the highest annual rental payment. There were, however, certain monarchs (such as Nader Shah) who, despite implementing this policy, never failed to maintain constant oversight over the territories thus delegated to an Arab amir or agent. After conquering Bahrain in 1736, Nader Shah deposed Sheikh Jabbareh and replaced him with Sheikh Nasir Khan ibn Abu Mazkur, from a tribe of Arabs residing in Iran who held Iranian nationality. While governing Bahrain, Sheikh Nasir Khan also commanded Iranian state's ships in the Persian Gulf, and despite Nader Shah's full trust in him, the Shah closely monitored the southern Iranian coasts and islands of Bahrain. This vigilance is evidenced by one of the fascinating edicts from this period, fortuitously preserved by a renowned Bushehri family, addressed to Sheikh Nasir:

...It has come to my attention that you have established contact with a Christian man and discussed with him the Persian Gulf and its islands, misled by his wandering and deceived by his comings and goings into thinking him a world traveler unto whom you have become endeared. Have you not read the words of the Almighty stating that neither the Jews nor Christians will be pleased with you unless you follow their faith? If after understanding this divine command I have recited to you, you still follow your desires, know that you will surely be ruined...

Upon receiving Nader's edict, Sheikh Nasir scrambled and, to prove his innocence before his crowned master, sent a petition to Nader explaining his actions:

...What has been reported about my conversations and friendship with that Christian man is inaccurate; the one who conveyed this news did not do so correctly. You know that I am ever vigilant in my border duties, but providing clothing and food to people is a trait of prophets and Khosrows...

Nader remained unconvinced and in another letter warned Sheikh Nasir against repeating such actions, writing:

...Your letter has arrived. This is not about the permissibility of providing food. Such matters belong to religious rulings, not political affairs which are our subject here...Someone I trust has informed me that the Christian man sought your permission to explore the hills of Bahrain and excavate its lowlands and highlands. This time I will overlook your actions, for your good character and pure heart are known...etc.

Unfortunately, the Qajar monarchs lacked Nader Shah's prudence and foresight, prioritizing the rental fees remitted to the royal treasury over the political ramifications (which now entangle us) when delegating governance of southern Iranian cities and ports to Arab governors. For instance, in 1803 CE, the Imam of Muscat(Maskat), Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad bin Abu Sa'id, dispatched envoys to the governor of Fars, obtaining a decree from Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar that delegated governance of Bandar Abbas and its dependencies (the islands of Qeshm and Hormuz) to him and his descendants for 75 years in exchange for an annual rental payment of 6,000 tumans. This lease, preceded by circumstances beyond this article's scope, was renewed during Naser al-Din Shah's reign, granting Sayyid Sa'id bin Sultan and his progeny governance of Bandar Abbas and its dependencies for 20 years at double the previous rental fee. Fortunately, this secondary lease was not extended further.

In the waning years of the Zand dynasty, a chieftain of the Jawasim tribe managed to procure an order granting him and his descendants the *kalanteri* (governorship) of Bandar Lengeh from the Iranian governor of Jahangiriyeh on the same rental tradition. This position remained in the hands of the tribe's chiefs until the late Qajar era.

In the administrative divisions of that time, the islands of Qeshm and Hormuz were dependencies of Bandar Abbas, while the Tunb islands and Abu Musa were subordinate to Bandar Lengeh.

Towards the end of Naser al-Din Shah's reign, the capable Iranian governor of Bandar Abbas, Sartip Haj Ahmad Khan Kebabi (so named for frequently hosting Arab rulers of the Persian Gulf with Iranian kebabs), dismissed the last Arab governor of Bandar Lengeh, Sheikh Qadib Jawasmi, at the central government's behest, placing him in chains and dispatching him under guard to Tehran. Iranian southern administrators of that era, considering Iran's sovereignty over the Tunb islands and Abu Musa incontrovertible (as these islands were unequivocal dependencies of Bandar Lengeh, with none contesting Iranian ownership then) refrained from deploying forces to these sparsely inhabited islands. Consequently, after Britain's establishment in the Persian Gulf and the Sheikhdoms of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah (whose ancestors had once governed Bandar Lengeh with Iranian permission) came under British protection, their English advisers prompted them to seize the strategically vital Tunb islands and Abu

Musa in the Strait of Hormuz. The claim to ownership was on the pretext that since the islands had formerly been under Jawasmi governorship, their ownership had transferred to the Sheikhdoms as the chiefs' descendants. However, the Sheikhs themselves knew well that their ancestors' rule over the Tunbs and Abu Musa had been a derivative right (derived from governing Bandar Lengeh), which was nullified when Iran, exercising its incontrovertible sovereignty over that port, decided to depose its Jawasmi governor. Thus, the descendants no longer retained any right to extend that defunct rule to Lengeh's dependencies (the Tunbs and Abu Musa) or forcibly impose their power there.

3. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN THE PERSIAN GULF AND THE OCCUPATION OF THE TUNB ISLANDS AND ABU MUSA

Since the illegal occupation of these islands by the proteges of British colonialism coincided with the reign of the weakest and most irresolute Qajar monarch, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, the Iranian government did not seriously contest this brazen aggression, leaving the fate of the Tunbs and Abu Musa to the winds of circumstance. However, if the Iranian sovereign neglected his country's legitimate rights, the Belgian officials overseeing Iran's customs affairs at that time fortunately did not exhibit such laxity and possessed ample knowledge of Iran's historical sovereignty over these islands. Consequently, in April 1904, shortly after Major Percy Cox's appointment as Britain's plenipotentiary in the Persian Gulf, a severe clash erupted between him and the Belgian advisors serving Iran regarding the status of the occupied islands. At this juncture, the Belgian Director-General of Southern Customs, personally visited the Tunb Islands and Abu Musa, ordering the removal of the flag of Sharjah (which the British had deliberately hoisted on Abu Musa as an affront to Iran) from the port's jetty and its replacement with Iran's Lion and Sun emblem. This order was promptly executed. Major Cox (the same individual who later became Sir Percy Cox, the British Minister in Tehran who signed the iniquitous 1919 Agreement with Vossuq al-Dowleh) instantly reported the incident to the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, concluding his dispatch:

...There is ample evidence that if we allow Persia to consolidate its foothold on these islands, it will not be long before we face grander claims by that government over the pearl fishing grounds of the Persian Gulf (i.e., the Bahrain archipelago), whose preservation is a pillar of our core policy in the region... (From the official records and correspondence of the Government of India, Cox's letter to Lord Curzon dated August 19, 1904)

Initially treating the matter with utmost gravity and contemplating military intervention, the Indian government ultimately decided to first pursue diplomatic channels through Sir Arthur Hardinge, the British Minister in Tehran at that time. Regrettably, due to Iran's profound political weakness during that era, compounded by a lack of sufficient naval power to reinforce its political maneuvers, the government eventually capitulated to British pressure. Iran agreed to recall its deployed personnel and temporarily remove its flag from the islands as a gesture of goodwill, provided the

Sheikhs of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah reciprocated by not replacing Iran's flag with their own illegitimate emblems. However, Cox, with the intention of humiliating the Iranian government and asserting British might to the local Sheikhs, colluded with Sheikh Saqr bin Khalid of Sharjah. Exploiting Iran's lack of naval forces in the Persian Gulf, he rehoisted Sharjah's flag over the islands, thereby perpetuating his country's hostile occupation of foreign soil.

4. IRAN'S REVIVAL OF CLAIMS IN THE PAHLAVI ERA

The first round of negotiations to determine the final status of these islands commenced in 1928 (the third year of Reza Shah's reign), led on Iran's behalf by Abdol Hossein Khan Teymurtash Khorasani (the powerful Court Minister at that time). On November 7, 1928, Lord Cushendun, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the British Foreign Office, sent detailed instructions to Sir Robert Clive, the British Minister in Tehran, requesting him to base his upcoming talks with the Iranian Court Minister on the enclosed guidelines. A section of this important document instructs the Minister:

...Bear in mind throughout your future negotiations that a key pillar of British policy in this region (i.e., the Persian Gulf) is the support of the Arab Shaikhs against the Iranian government. For this reason, the British government cannot afford to grant Persia any concessions regarding the Tunb islands and Abu Musa. These islands, along with the Sirri island, are claimed by the Shaikhs of Sharjah as the descendants of the Bani Jasim Amirs, who consider them all their property. A branch of this tribe became established in Bandar Lengeh and other parts of southern Persia in the 18th century, either through the use of force or via marriage alliances with Iranian Shaikhs. Persia's past claims of ownership over these islands have always rested on the argument that the Arab governors of Bandar Lengeh belonged to the Jawasim tribe, were Iranian subjects, and ruled that port and its dependencies (the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, Abu Musa, and Sirri) on Persia's behalf. Consequently, according to the Iranian argument, the sovereignty exercised by the Jawasim Shaikhs over these islands was merely an extension of Persia's ownership over a part of its territorial domain. However, the Shaikhs of Sharjah (who belong to the Jawasim tribe) believe that when the governors of Bandar Lengeh administered these islands, they did so as Jawasim Amirs rather than as Iranian officials. This is a view supported by the British government... Therefore, insist throughout your negotiations with the Iranian government that the Tunb islands and Abu Musa belong to the Jawasim Amirs, an entitlement passed down to their current descendants (the Shaikhs of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah). However, we must also consider the possibility that the Iranians may disregard our position and attempt to occupy the islands they claim through military force. To prevent such an eventuality, the Commander-in-Chief of naval forces in this region has been instructed to maintain the present status quo in the Persian Gulf at all costs, employing armed force as a last resort to preclude the Iranians from seizing the Tunb islands and Abu Musa..." (Extracted from British Foreign Office records, Document No. 402 - Lord Cushendun's letter to Sir Robert Clive dated November 7, 1928).

In the face of such rigid instructions, the British Minister in Tehran had his hands effectively tied, and as long as London did not revoke or modify the directives issued,

reaching any sort of agreement seemed extremely difficult, if not impossible. While the Iranian government was armed with the weapon of its legitimate rights, it unfortunately lacked a strong naval force capable of challenging British maritime power. Nevertheless, Iran's representative refused to abandon his country's claims of sovereignty over these islands, persistently pressing his government's rightful demands. Among the arguments the Court Minister invoked for regaining the islands was that the Persian Gulf's smugglers had turned them into bases for illicit operations and trade, severely undermining Iran's foreign commerce. On January 7, 1929 (while Iraq was still under formal British trusteeship), the issue of the Tunbs and Abu Musa resurfaced in the negotiations between Teymurtash and Sir Robert Clive. The Minister provided his Foreign Secretary with a detailed report covering part of these discussions:

... We then discussed the Tunb islands and Abu Musa, and I asked the Court Minister what benefit Persia derives from possessing these islands beyond its claim that Persian Gulf smugglers have turned them into storage depots for contraband destined for illegal export to Persia. Teymurtash responded that the Iranian government does not view the matter as the English perceive it, but rather asserts that **these islands form an integral part of Persia and have been forcibly occupied by others**. I replied to Teymurtash according to the instructions forwarded to me, and the Court Minister stated that in such a case, the only recourse would be to refer the issue to arbitration. I expressed hope to His Excellency that the parties could resolve the matter between themselves without need for arbitration... (Extracted from Sir Robert Clive's confidential report to Sir Austen Chamberlain dated January 8, 1929 - Document No. 420 in British Political Records)

The Persian-British negotiations dragged on until mid-spring 1929 without clarifying the status of the islands. In May of that year, Britain held general elections, ousting Baldwin's Conservative government. The Labour cabinet assumed power, with Mr. Arthur Henderson replacing Sir Austen Chamberlain as Foreign Secretary.

Contrary to the fanciful notion prevalent until a couple of decades ago across the Middle East that British socialist leaders abhorred colonial traditions and did not believe in retaining territories forcibly wrested from others in the past, the first 20th-century Labour government in Britain—the very administration in which Arthur Henderson served as Foreign Secretary—strove far more vigorously than the Conservatives to preserve the British colonial legacy. This is evident from the peremptory instructions the new Foreign Secretary issued to Sir Robert Clive, the British Minister in Tehran, which effectively brought the Persian-British negotiations over the Tunbs and Abu Musa to a halt and provided a basis for Britain's obstructionism over the subsequent thirty years. (The complete text of this critical political document is available to researchers as Document No. 479 in Volume VII of British Foreign Office records.)

5. THE CONCLUSION

Subsequent Persian-British clashes over these islands (especially in the 1970s) are more or less part of contemporary Iranian history. Although during the former Shah's reign, patriotic Iranian researchers were never permitted access to files pertaining to the Tunbs and Abu Musa, the relevant authorities at the Foreign Ministry should face little difficulty accessing them and can fully acquaint themselves with the negotiations that led to the restitution of these islands to their rightful owner.

The salient point, however, is that these islands have always belonged to Iran, and Britain's eighty-year hostile occupation could never have transferred the incontrovertible ownership rights of Iran to the British-protected Sheikdoms of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah (During the period when we were engaged in disputes and conflicts with the transgressing British government over the sovereignty of these islands, neither a country called Iraq nor an individual named Saddam Hussein had yet emerged onto the stage of existence). Unfortunately, over the two centuries of British dominance and unbridled activities in the Persian Gulf region, they cultivated agents and operatives whose descendants now seek to revive Britain's decaying policies and thoughts under different guises (such as the mask of Arab nationalism), striving to keep the flames of colonialism burning in the Persian Gulf. The unpleasant voices emanating today from the throats of Arab diplomats (such as the Iraqi ambassador in Damascus [in 1979]) or from the mouths of their higher-ups in Baghdad [during the Baath regime's rule or other Arab rulers who have advanced unfounded claims against Iran's islands over the past 50 years] are but echoes of the very utterances we heard from Sir Percy Cox in 1904, Lord Cushendun in 1928, and later Arthur Henderson. We recognize these voices and the ill-intentioned tutor who has instructed these fledgling diplomats in such rhetoric.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported.