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# Iran: The Persian Gulf Islands Dispute

**A Research Paper**

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# Iran: The Persian Gulf Islands Dispute

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## A Research Paper

*Research for this report was completed  
on 4 May 1980.*

The authors of this paper are [Redacted]  
the Iran Task Force, Office of Political Analysis,  
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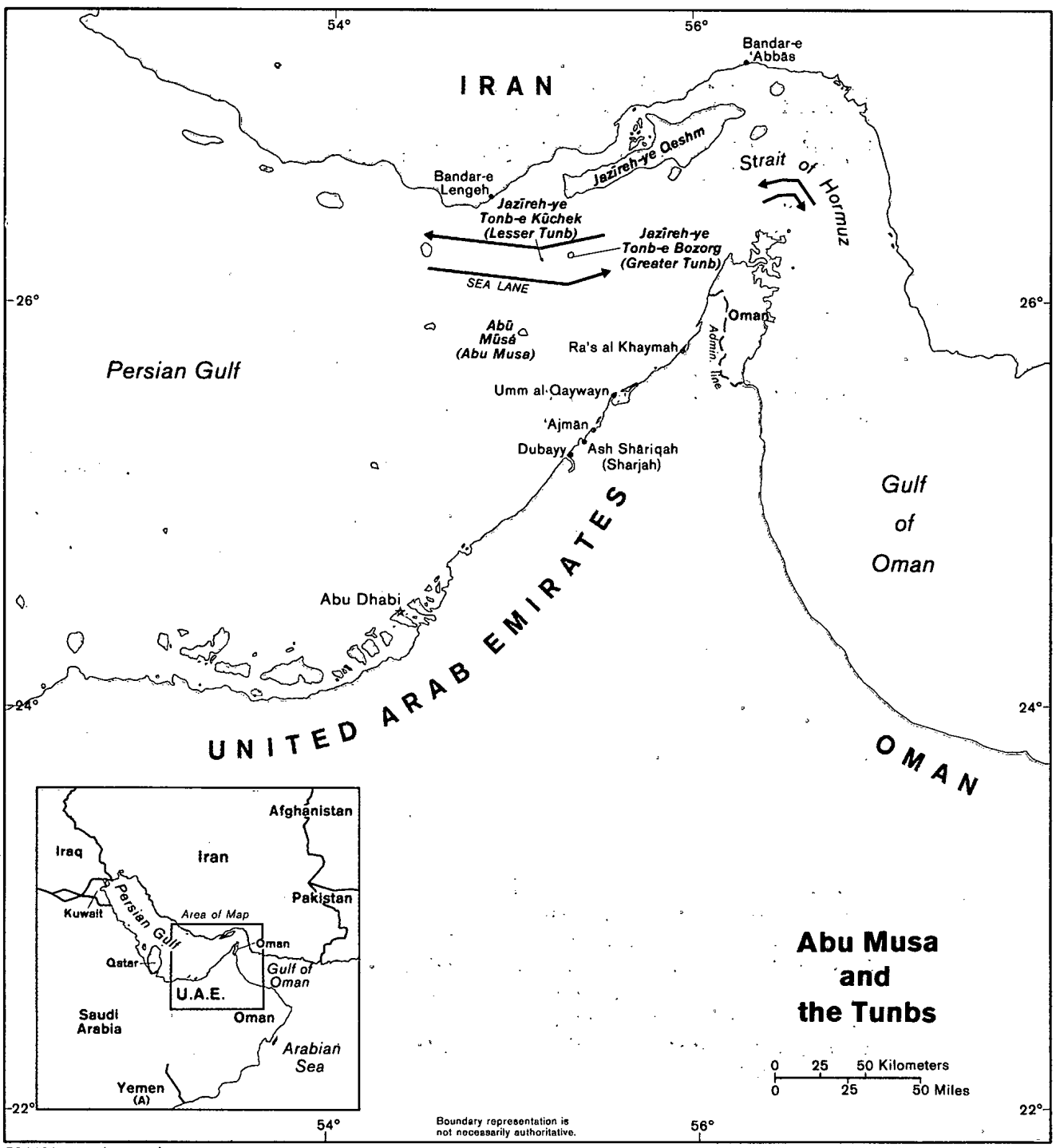
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**Iran: The Persian Gulf Islands Dispute**

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**Overview**

Iran's occupation of three small Persian Gulf islands—Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa—has emerged as a major source of friction between Iran and its Arab neighbors, especially Iraq.

The islands occupy a strategic position at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran first took over the islands when the Shah's troops occupied them on 30 November 1971. In late March this year, President Bani-Sadr told Arab journalists that the new regime plans to hold onto the islands despite Arab requests that they be turned over to the United Arab Emirates.

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Iraq has been the most vocal advocate of the Arab cause. In early April Baghdad publicly demanded that the islands be returned to Arab sovereignty, and Baghdad radio has kept up a steady stream of attacks on Tehran for holding onto the islands. Baghdad's ulterior motive is to rally Arab support for its campaign against Iran.

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### Iran: The Persian Gulf Islands Dispute

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#### Historical Background

The three small Persian Gulf islands—Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa—are located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, the entrance to the Persian Gulf. All claims to the islands are tenuous, although history seems to give the Arabs the stronger case:

- In the late 18th century and for most of the 19th century the islands were under the control of the Shaykh of Lengeh, a port on the northern side of the Persian Gulf. Tehran bases its claim on the fact that when Persia seized the port in 1887, it also claimed the dependent islands.
- The British—as the protecting power in the Trucial States—occupied the islands on the grounds that the Shaykh of Lengeh was an Arab whose family lived in Sharjah and Ras al-Khaymah, and the islands were part of that holding. Iranian troops landed on the islands on several occasions seeking to assert Tehran's claim, but never established a permanent presence.
- When in 1968 the British announced their intention to withdraw from the Gulf, the seven shaykhdoms that constituted the Trucial States formed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and pressed their claims—Ras al-Khaymah to the Tunbs and Sharjah to Abu Musa.
- The Shah negotiated an agreement with Sharjah on 29 November 1971 that stated that neither would give up claim to Abu Musa. Iran would exercise full jurisdiction over one portion of the island, which the Shah's troops would occupy, while Sharjah would exercise jurisdiction over the island's police station. No agreement was reached with Ras al-Khaymah.

The Iranian occupation of the islands on 30 November 1971 led to a short, sharp outbreak of anti-Iranian and anti-British sentiment in the Arab world. Libya seized British oil assets, and the UAE took the issue to the UN without success.

#### Existing Military Facilities on the Islands

The Iranian military facilities built during the Shah's regime on Abu Musa, and to a lesser extent on Greater Tunb, can support only limited military operations. These meager facilities were intended to assist the Shah in maintaining security in the immediate Gulf area. The small number of Iranian ground and naval forces stationed on Abu Musa and Greater Tunb represent more a psychological threat than a defense force against disruptions to Persian Gulf security and Iranian shipping interests. Since the Shah's fall, a contingent of Iranian military forces has continued to occupy the two islands.

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The small airfields on Abu Musa and Greater Tunb are both suitable for handling light transport aircraft, such as Aero Commanders. The Greater Tunb airfield, located on the southeastern portion of the island, has a runway 932 meters long and 36 meters wide and a parking apron at the southwestern end of the landing strip. There are no support facilities at the Tunb airfield.

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The Abu Musa airfield is larger and has a sand surface runway 1,666 meters long and 32 meters wide. The runway ends with a small earth parking apron on the western end. Helicopter landing pads on Abu Musa are located at the military facility, the local village a short distance south of the facility, and at the western end of the airfield.

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The naval docking facility on Abu Musa consists of a small jetty on the northwest coast. It can handle small freighters and patrol and landing craft. Just south of this area, in the "civilian" portion occupied by the islands, a small harbor is located where native craft can be beached.

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Like Abu Musa, Greater Tunb has a small natural harbor at the village on the south coast. There are several other spots for small craft to land. Of these, the

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best landing site is on the beach north of the southeastern coastal protrusion on the island. [Redacted]

**Water.** The quality of the fresh water on the islands is generally poor. Although well water is available on Abu Musa and Greater Tunb, the Iranians transport fresh water to their military facilities. Some water shortages have been occurring, however, because of irregular deliveries. [Redacted]

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What appears to be a communications antenna is located on Jabal Halwa, which, with a 116-meter elevation, is the highest hill on Abu Musa. No use of this structure has been confirmed. [Redacted]

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**Physical Features**

**Terrain.** All three islands are small. With an area of 11.6 square kilometers, Abu Musa is the largest. Greater Tunb, roughly circular in shape, is approximately 10.3 square km in area. Lesser Tunb, 11 km west of Greater Tunb, is only 1 square km in area. [Redacted]

**Population.** Only Abu Musa and Greater Tunb are inhabited. [Redacted] in 1972 there were about 800 natives on Abu Musa and about 200 on Greater Tunb. Lesser Tunb is believed to be without resources and apparently has had little attraction for human habitation; its infestation by poisonous snakes makes it doubly uninviting. [Redacted]

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All three islands consist of low rocky hills interspersed among flatter patches of land. The less barren areas allow for some agriculture, including date palms and small citrus groves. [Redacted]

The civilian population on Abu Musa and Greater Tunb is primarily Arab, although a few unskilled Iranian laborers arrived after the Iranian occupation in 1971. The Arabs are descendants of the Qasimi tribe, whose Shaykhs ruled along the Trucial Coast states of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaymah, both now part of the UAE. [Redacted]

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Some of the hills on Abu Musa contain iron oxide deposits. Throughout the 1950s a British mining concession exported iron ore from Abu Musa, which was then claimed to be one of three areas in the world with deposits of pure iron oxide. [Redacted]

Abu Musa and Greater Tunb are home for the islanders most of the year. Many "vacation" in the UAE, however, during the hot and arid summer months of June through October. The chief source of income is fishing, but smuggling via Abu Musa has become profitable over the last few years. [Redacted]

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The islands' beaches are subject to heavy surf during onshore winds. At times, gusty offshore winds trouble the local fishermen. Small boat landings on the islands are hampered by high cliffs and smoothfaced, underwater rocks, although landings generally are possible along some of the sandy beaches. [Redacted]

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**Roads.** A road system on Abu Musa supports the island's limited military role. A two-lane, hard-surfaced road leads from the military complex on the west coast to the village a short distance south. Two similar roads connect the jetty and airfield to the complex. Loose-surfaced roads lead to other parts of the island. [Redacted]

The islanders' continued residence on Abu Musa has sometimes been as much a matter of controversy between Iran and the UAE, specifically the emirate of Sharjah, as has the sovereignty issue. While the UAE has attempted to increase the number of Abu Musans, Iran has tried to pressure residents to leave. During 1977 the ruler of Sharjah, Shaykh Sultan, started a campaign to encourage and finance Arabs who were

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A two-lane, loose-surfaced road on Greater Tunb runs from the airfield in the southeast, past what appears to be a military area west of the airfield, and on to the village. Additional tracks extend throughout the island. [Redacted]

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willing to move to Abu Musa. The Shaykh hoped in this way to maintain his influence over the island and keep his hand in the offshore oil production near the island, whose profits Iran and Sharjah share. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Iranian efforts to discourage the Arab presence on Abu Musa have included requiring fishermen to obtain licenses from Iran. The traditional summer migration of the residents was halted in 1977 by the Iranian Government. The increasing Iranian military presence on Abu Musa disturbed many island residents, who as of 1978 had begun leaving to settle in the UAE. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

**Oil: Fuel for the Fire**

The prospect of oil being discovered off Abu Musa added fuel to the territorial dispute between Iran and Sharjah. In 1970 offshore oil exploration was to have begun near the island. The already tense political situation was complicated still further by claims to the area of drilling by two emirates—Sharjah and Umm al Qaywayn. [Redacted]

The oil conflict between Sharjah and Iran was resolved in November 1971 under the Abu Musa accord. An agreement between the two provided for the sharing of revenue derived from any mineral discoveries, including oil, around the island. This agreement is still in effect. [Redacted]

In late 1972, the first oilfield, Mubarak, was discovered 12 km east of Abu Musa. Production from the field began in early 1974. Mubarak is one of the deepest oil-producing reservoirs in the Persian Gulf. Depth and high well pressure problems have hampered oil production. Approximately 16,000 barrels of oil per day are currently extracted from the Mubarak field. Sharjah pays 30 percent of its income from this field to Umm al Qaywayn and apparently 6 percent to Ajman indirectly involved in the earlier oil dispute. [Redacted]

**Khomeini and the Islands**

Many Arabs hoped that the fall of the Shah would lead to the return of the islands to Arab control. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Iran's position on the islands rapidly became entangled with its overall Persian Gulf relationships. Militant Iranian leaders frightened most of the Gulf's Arab rulers with promises of exporting the revolution to the deprived and oppressed in the Arab monarchies on the Peninsula. Some Iranians even revived Iran's claim to Bahrain—a long-standing claim abandoned by the Shah in 1971. [Redacted]

Tehran does not intend to return the islands to the UAE. The Iranians see little reason to give up the strategic advantages they offer and see no ideological rationale for returning the islands to a monarchy. Iraqi demands for the islands' return only increase Tehran's suspicions that the Arabs want the islands to improve their own military position. [Redacted]

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**Baghdad's Position**

Iraq has never claimed the islands for itself, but it seeks to advance the Arab claim. [Redacted]

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Tehran has been alarmed by Iraq's comments on the islands and probably believes that Baghdad has considered using force to seize them. [Redacted]

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