



ABU MUSĀ I – II

ABŪ MŪSĀ, island in the Persian Gulf.

i. Description.

ii. Recent history.

i. Description

Abū Mūsā, situated near 26° north latitude and 55° east longitude, is about two miles long and only a few square miles in area. It rises to a maximum 360 feet in height, consists of coral limestone and volcanic material, is covered with a thin grassy steppe, and lacks a natural growth of trees. This island's location at the end of the Persian Gulf, near the strait of Hormoz, is strategically favorable; it lies nearly halfway between Bandar Lenga (Iran) and Sharja, one of the shaikhdoms of the United Arab Emirates. In the past, due to location and strategic importance, Abū Mūsā, like the small neighboring islands, was repeatedly exposed to the conflict of interest between Iran and the Arab states of the Gulf region.

Lorimer reported that, at the turn of the century, around twenty families from Sharja were settled on the island; and the shaikh of Sharja owned about 150 date palm there. In all, twenty wells supplied water for the palm trees as well as the drinking water for the population, who consisted exclusively of fishermen and pearl divers. Food supplies were shipped in from Iran, particularly from Bandar Lenga. Small iron mining operations, employing up



to 100 workers seasonally, were also directed from the mainland (D. Hawley, *The Trucial States*, London, 1970, p. 203). The Arab population has been estimated, since the Iranian takeover, to be about 300-400 people; its occupation is, almost exclusively, fishing. Economic and social living conditions of the island have been improved through the construction of a desalinization plant, cooling equipment, an ice factory, port, and other infrastructure facilities.

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ii. recent history

When Iran relinquished its claim to Bahrain, which had been considered by many Iranians as the fourteenth province of Iran, the shah of Iran refused to relinquish Iran's claim to Abū Mūsā and the two Tumbs. He made it clear that he was prepared to use force to maintain the islands' security. Abū Mūsā had been treated by the British as under the sovereignty of Sharja; controlling the defense and foreign affairs of the Trucial sheikhdoms, they also controlled the future of Abū Mūsā. But Iran feared that the local shaikhs of the southern Persian Gulf were not strong enough to defend the islands against harassment or aggression. Iran also was concerned that Abū Mūsā could be utilized as a base for air strikes against southern Iran or for pressure on the shipping lanes through the narrow Hormoz Straits.

When the British Labour Government announced in January, 1968, that it intended to withdraw all British forces east of Suez by 1971, Iran's fears were immediately raised. Its claim to Abū Mūsā and the Tumbs was made public



shortly afterwards. It was widely thought at that time—but discounted officially by the British—that Iran believed that it had a tacit understanding from Britain, whereby Iran’s claim to Abū Mūsā and the Tumbs was to be satisfied as a compromise for permitting the people of Bahrain to decide their own political future. From Tehran’s viewpoint there was a significant difference between Bahrain and these islands, since Bahrain’s population totaled over 200,000, while Abū Mūsā’s population was under 500. Iran made it clear that any support for the newly promulgated Union of Trucial States would not be forthcoming from Tehran until its claims were met. It contended that the British had taken the islands by force over seventy years before and that Britain’s occupation in no way altered Iran’s residual sovereignty.

On 30 November 1971, one day before the expiration of the British treaties, Iranian military forces occupied all three islands—Abū Mūsā by agreement with Britain and Sharja and the Tumbs without agreement. Two Iranian soldiers and five Ras al-Khaimah policemen appear to have died in the landing on the Tumbs. The Abū Mūsā settlement provided that “one half of the oil revenues from the island and its continental shelf should be allocated, under special arrangements, for the welfare of the people of Sharja.” Iran agreed to pay \$4 million per year until Sharja’s annual oil income would exceed \$8 million per year. The people of Sharja were also granted fishing rights. Iran confirmed the Butte Bottle Gas and Oil Company’s exploitative rights on and around Abū Mūsā. Iraq, joined by Ras al-Khaimah, lodged a formal complaint with the Security Council of the United Nations.

In the “Memorandum of Understanding” as Iran refers to the accord under which the Iranian force occupied about one-half of a carefully demarcated part of Abū Mūsā, Iran and Sharja left the issue of sovereignty in a state of ambiguity; therefore, this question may still be settled at some later date.

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