



ABU MUSĀ III. IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

iii. In International Relations

ABU MUSĀ (Bu Musā), a small island in the eastern Persian Gulf (25°52'N, 55°2'E). Persia considers it a town within the Abu Musā township (*šahrestān*) of the Hormozgān (q.v.) Province (Nurbakš, pp. 308, 314-15). The Shaikhdom of Sharjah of the United Arab Emirates claims it as its own. In November 1971 Persia and Sharjah partitioned the island into two exclusive zones of national jurisdiction. In 1992 Persia took control of the entire island, alleging security concerns. In Anglo-Persian diplomatic exchanges prior to 1972 and Persia-UAE relations since then, the status of the island is mentioned often in relation to that of the twin [Tonb](#) islands.

Description. Abutting the sea-lanes of communication at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, Abu Musā is located some 42 miles (67 km) from the Persian mainland and 40 (64 km) miles from Sharjah. Its nearly rectangular shape is about 8 sq. mi. in area. Its relatively flat sandy plain is marked by hills and the highest elevation is 360 ft. (110 meters), north of center at the summit of Mount Halva (Lorimer II, p. 1275; Nurbakš, pp. 304-7, 315-16). The 19th- and early 20th-century description of the island as a lair for pirates and smugglers, a haven for the tempest-tossed, the site of red oxide (ochre) pits, and the temporary and seasonal abode of fishermen, pearl divers, and herders no longer applies.



The island's population is estimated at 800 (2004). The northern sector of the island consists of housing units built for Persian military personnel and civil service employees, and the area is served by electricity, desalinated water, wells, farms, mosques, schools, general services, an infirmary, and a ferry and air link to Bandar 'Abbās on the Persian mainland. The population of this sector was less than fifty in the early 1980s, but by the last year of the Iran-Iraq war in 1987 the Persian military stationed there numbered 700. In 1995 Persia increased its military presence to 4,000 and deployed a variety of missiles on the island. The airport opened in March 1996. The southern (Sharjah) sector of the island consists of Abu Musā Town; it is linked to the Arabian mainland by boat service. In the 1980s its population peaked at between 850 and 1,000, due mainly to the influx of tourists from the Arabian littoral. The town is served by a number of compounds, an electricity generating plant, and a desalination facility. The island's offshore oil and gas deposit, the Mubārak Field, is an area of 15 sq. mi. located 6 miles (9.6 km) off the eastern shore of the island. According to U.S. sources, its oil output is reported to be a maximum of 35,000 barrels per day (Internet Resource 1; Internet Resource 2; Internet Resource 3).

Nomenclature. The origin of the name Abu Musā is intertwined with those of Sirri, an island located 24 miles (38 km) west of Abu Musā (Lorimer II, p.1830), Sir Bu Na'ayr, 50 miles (80 km) northeast of Abu Dhabi (Lorimer II, 1292), and Sir Bani Yās, 100 miles (160 km) southwest of Abu Dhabi (Lorimer II, p. 1931; Abdullah, p. 57). The prefix *sir* (pronounced also as *sayr* in Persian) in the island names Sir Bani Yās (now called simply Yās) and Sir Abu Na'ayr signifies a gathering place of a particular tribal entity, especially in connection with the pearl fisheries. In the literature, the significance of *sir* is at best confused (J.C. Wilkinson, pp. 337-49, esp. p. 346). The confusion stems from the discrepancy in orthography, in that *sir* is spelled with both *s* and *ş* (Lorimer I, pp. 2738-40). As a noun, *sir* (also written Sirr or Seer in English), is also used to refer to an area of Ra's al-Khaymah (Lorimer II, p. 1825-26; Miles, pp, 440-41). The term, written with *sin*, occurs also on the Persian coast, in the name of the summit of Jabal Siri of the maritime range in Šibkuh (Lorimer II, p. 1780).

The occurrence of the island names Sir Bani Yās, Sir Bu Na'ayr and, by extension, Sir Bu Sur for Sirri (see, e.g., Lorimer I, 1831, a well named Bu Sur) suggests the proto-toponym Sir Bu Musā as the root-name for Abu Musā Island. In the early 1700s, this island was referred to on European maps as Maloro (see G. De l'Isle). Niebuhr reported the name as Bumose (p. 328), and in



R. Bonne's *Carte de l'Arabie, du Golfe Persique et de la Mer Rouge* the name appeared as *Abamausa*, while in another edition of the same map it was given as *Adamusa*. The English records referred to it as Bomosa until the adoption of Bu Musā (Lorimer II, 1275).

The Marāziq (pl. of Mazruq) of the maritime Lār District competed with the Qāsemi of Lengeh for Greater Farur, Sirri and Abu Musā islands and in 1788-89 the Persian governor of the Jahāngira District mediated the differences among them (Bavand, p. 81). The inhabitants of Sirri Island at the turn of the 20th century included the Abu Dastur from the Persian coast (Lorimer II, p. 1830), who would have originated from Dastur which, according to Lorimer, was situated 37 miles (60 km) southeast of Nāy Band and 10 miles (16 km) west of Šivuh on the Šibkuh coast (Ibid., p. 1795). Whether or not the Abu Musā were of the Mazruq is not indicated.

The Abu Dastur dove for pearls in the waters near Dalmah, an island 25 miles (40 km) northwest of Jabal Dhanna off Abu Dhabi (Lorimer II, p. 363). One of the pearl banks 4 miles (6.5 km) southwest of the island was still called Abu Dastur at the turn of the 20th century (Lorimer II, p. 363). Another pearl bank, located 9 miles (14.5 km) to the southeast of the island, was called Hawād Bin-Musammih (Lorimer, II, p. 363). This latter is the only confirmation of the existence of the Bu Musā as a likely tribal entity with sufficient context to be related to Abu Musā Island. The name *Musammih* may derive from one who was a *musaqqam*, which in the pearl trade referred to one who financed a pearling fleet (Lorimer I, 2227).

It was not unusual to find a pearl bank named for a group from a distant location. At the turn of the 20th century, the pearl bank known as Dhahr al-Yās off Dalmah Island lay 33 miles (53 km) west of Yās Island itself (Lorimer, II, p. 1932). The Abu Dastur pearl bank at Dalmah lay more than 96 miles (154 km) from Sirri. A pearl bank named after Bin-Musammih therefore could be related to a clan related to Abu Musā island 112 miles (180 km) away.

Historical Claims. From a historical perspective, the Persian and Sharjah claims to Abu Musā have hinged on the interpretation of the murky dynamics of the Qāsemi tribal confederacy, which straddled the opposite shores of the Persian Gulf between 1747 and 1887. From the Persian point of view, the Qāsemi, who were settled in Lengeh, were deputies of the Persian government and hence they ruled Lengeh and its offshore possessions as lieutenants of the Persian government. The Qāsemi of the lower gulf, to whom the ruling Shaikhs



of Sharjah belonged, believed that Abu Musā belonged to them as a hereditary tribal possession, whose administration was put in the hands of the Qāsemi branch at Lengeh for convenience (Abdullah, pp. 233-38; Bavand, pp. 80-82; Marschall, pp. 128-29). On the one hand, as evidence of state activity, Persia could point to a Persian provincial governor who mediated a dispute between the Qāsemi and Marāziq tribes of Lengeh over pasturage on Abu Musā in 1788-89 (Bavand, p. 81). The Qāsemi, on the other hand, held that the first red-oxide concession for the island was issued by the Shaikh of Sharjah in around 1897, albeit to a Persian contractor from Lengeh (Lorimer II, 1275; Busch, pp. 356-57). The population mix of the island at the turn of the 20th century drew from both the Persian and the Arabian mainlands (Lorimer II, p. 1275-76).

The status of Abu Musā may have required some clarification in 1887 when the Persian government dissolved the Qāsemi deputy-governorship of Lengeh and planted its flag on Sirri Island (Lorimer I, pp. 2065-66). Instead, the British government, which spoke for the Qasemi chiefs in external affairs, acquiesced in the Persian actions at Sirri (Laithwaite, Part III: pp. 15-16; Lorimer I, p. 2066). In the following year Britain did nothing to counter the Persian claim to Abu Musā that appeared in a report prepared by the Persian military for use by the prime minister (Laithwaite, Part III: p. 15). At that time, it was the view of the British government that Abu Musā belonged to Persia, and publications by the British admiralty, such as *Persian Gulf Pilot* series and various authoritative and official maps, particularly the *Map of Persia* (1886) by the War Office, reflected that understanding (Bavand, pp. 84-89).

Diplomatic Dispute: 1904-1968. At the turn of the 20th century, the attention paid by the Persian government to its southern trade, in the form of additional excise and customs posts, alarmed the merchants of Lengeh, who now sought to make Abu Musā a port of call for their imports and exports (Parker, Part I; Lorimer I, pp. 2594-97, 2602-7; Abdullah, p. 244; Bavand, pp. 90-91). The local British authorities in the gulf viewed this development with alarm, as it foretold the establishment of a viable Persian presence offshore. To preempt the Persians, the Government of India prompted the Shaikh of Sharjah in April 1903 to raise his flag on Abu Musā and keep flying it as a sign of ownership (Parker, Part I; Laithwaite, Part IV: p. 17; Lorimer I, pp. 745). In March 1904 the Persian customs service removed the Shaikh's flag and raised the Persian flag in its place, posting riflemen to guard it (Abdullah, p. 245; Bavand, pp. 91-92).

Following British diplomatic protests, Persia and Britain agreed to the removal of the Persian flag and guards from the island in exchange for a promise that



an opportunity would be given to the Persian government to discuss the status of the island with the British government (Lorimer I, p. 2138; Bavand, pp. 93-94). On 17 June 1904, the Shaikh of Sharjah re-hoisted his flag on Abu Musā under the direction of the British government; three days later the Persian government objected to this as a violation of the status quo agreement (Bavand, pp. 93-94). In reply to the Persian protest, the British embassy referred the matter to the Foreign Office in London and in July the Persian government was told that the Shaikh had the right to fly his flag on an island that was not as yet occupied by any government (Parker, Part I; Bavand, p. 94).

For the next sixty-four years Persia and Britain engaged intermittently in heated discussions about the status of Abu Musā (and the Tonb) islands but nothing came of them. (See tonb for a summary of Anglo-Persian diplomatic relations concerning the Tonbs and Abu Musā.)

1971 Memorandum of Understanding. The decision in 1968 by the British government to withdraw from the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971 offered an opportunity to resolve the claims to Abu Musā and the Tonb islands and to work out a post-colonial solution to other related problems.

British and American diplomatic efforts, in consultation with the regional powers Persia and Saudi Arabia, produced remarkable results in just three years: Bahrain and Qatar became independent countries and the remaining seven shaikhdoms formed the United Arab Emirates. Persia relinquished its longstanding claim to Bahrain, took possession of the Tonbs, and agreed to a transaction best characterized as a lease of a part of Abu Musā from the Shaikh of Sharjah without recognizing his title to the island (al-Saud, pp. 78-115).

The Persia-Sharjah Memorandum of Understanding came about as the result of intermediation by the British government (al-Saud, pp. 116-21). In a letter dated 18 November 1971 and addressed to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the British Principal Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Khalid bin Mohammad al-Qasimi (Khāled b. Moḥammed al-Qāsemi), ruler of Sharjah and its dependencies, confirmed his acceptance of the arrangements set forth in the Memorandum and sought confirmation of the same by Persian government.

The preface to the Memorandum provided clearly that “[n]either Iran nor Sharjah will give up its claim to Abu Musa nor recognise the other side’s



claim.” “Against this background,” it read, “the following arrangements will be made:

1. Iranian troops will arrive on Abu Musa. They will occupy areas the extent of which have [sic] been agreed on the map attached to this memorandum.

2(a). Within the agreed areas occupied by Iranian troops, Iran will have full jurisdiction and the Iranian flag will fly.

2(b). Sharjah will retain full jurisdiction over the remainder of the island. The Sharjah flag will continue to fly over the Sharjah police post on the same basis that the Iranian flag will fly over the Iranian military quarters.

3. Iran and Sharjah recognize the breadth of the island’s territorial sea as twelve nautical miles.

4. Exploitation of the petroleum resources of Abu Musa and the seabed and subsoil beneath the territorial waters will be conducted by Buttes Gas and Oil Company under the existing agreement which must be acceptable to Iran. Half of the governmental oil revenues hereafter attributable to the said exploitation shall be paid directly by the company to Iran and half to Sharjah.

5. The nationals of Iran and Sharjah shall have equal rights to fish in the territorial waters of Abu Musa.

6. A financial assistance agreement will be signed between Iran and Sharjah.

(The text of the Memorandum and the attendant exchange of diplomatic notes are reprinted in H. Amirahmadi, pp.161-75; the map showing the areas of national jurisdiction is reprinted in P. Mojtahed-Zadeh, p. 229; a schematic version of this map appears also in al-Saud, p. 118.)

The jurisdictional line of demarcation extended from the coast on the southwest of the island and moved northeasterly to the plains abutting Mount Halva, skirted the southern and eastern approaches of the mountain, extended south along the eastern coast of the island ending on the southeastern shore. The northern sector thus included the strategic elevations, while the southern portion included the island’s then village (Abu Musā) and other infrastructure improvements (al-Saud, p. 117).

On 24 November 1971 Douglas-Home communicated the Shaikh’s offer to the



Persian government. On the next day, the Persian foreign minister informed Douglas-Home that Iran had accepted the arrangements for Abu Musā. The Persian foreign minister then wrote another note to Douglas-Home, adding a condition to Persia's earlier acceptance of the arrangements to the effect that nothing in the arrangements would restrict the freedom of Persia to take any measures on Abu Musā that, in its opinion, would be necessary to safeguard the security of the island or of the Persian forces.

The next day Douglas-Home replied stating that he had taken note of the second letter and conveyed the understanding to the ruler of Sharjah. This new understanding reserved for Persia powers far greater than the plain and simple meaning of the Memorandum. There is no written record indicating the Shaikh of Sharjah's agreement to Persia's new understanding about having a free hand regarding the security of the whole island.

In the early hours of 30 November 1971, on the last day of Britain's treaty relations with Sharjah, a Persian naval taskforce arrived off Abu Musā and the landing party was greeted by the Deputy Ruler of Sharjah, who then proceeded at the head of a delegation to pay a courtesy visit to the chief of the Persian naval staff aboard the Persian destroyer *Artemis*. The Persian admiral presented the visiting Shaikh with a copy of the Aryamehr edition of the Holy Qur'ān. After tea the Sharjah delegation left the ship, as the Persian troops meanwhile secured their position on island (Rasā'i).

Still on 30 November 1971 the Persian foreign minister wrote directly to the Shaikh of Sharjah, arguably now a head of an independent state, and proposed the terms of the financial arrangement contemplated by article 6 of the Memorandum. Beginning on 21 April 1972 and for the next nine years, Persia would pay every six months the sum of 1.5 million pounds sterling to the Shaikh unless the revenue received by the Shaikh from the exploitation of Abu Musā's oil, gas and minerals in any six months exceeded 750,000 pounds sterling, in which case Iran would pay the difference up to 1.5 million, with no payment being made for a six-month period in which the Sharjah's revenues exceeded 1.5 million. As an inducement to the Shaikh to accept this arrangement sooner, Persia offered additional 125,000 pounds sterling for every month that he signed up before April 21. For the convenience of the Shaikh, the amounts due could be paid in German or United States currencies. At the end of the eighth year, this financial assistance arrangement was to be reviewed and be left to either party to give notice to terminate the arrangement at the end of the ninth year.



On 1 December 1971 the Shaikh agreed to the financial assistance proposal in its entirety and stated that the Persian foreign minister's letter containing the proposal and Shaikh's reply be regarded as constituting an agreement between Persia and himself, entering into force on that day's date. Yet curiously, reminiscent of earlier overreaching, the Persian foreign minister wrote to the Shaikh stating that Persia would regard itself as entitled to terminate or suspend payments under the said financial assistance agreement if the Shaikh took any action inconsistent, in Persia's view, with friendly relations between Persia and Sharjah. This condition, wrote the minister, constituted an integral part of the agreement.

With the deadline of 1 December 1971 for British withdrawal fast approaching, the Memorandum was the product of a last-ditch effort (al-Saud, pp. 110-15). The Memorandum addressed the parties' immediate objectives: Persia's goal to acquire military control of the island and a share of the oil, and Sharjah's need for cash, which could be further satisfied by an enlargement of the concession area exploited by Buttes, the oil concessionaire (al-Saud, pp.119). To placate their domestic audiences, the parties offered their own gratuitous interpretations of the Memorandum. The Persian prime minister, Amir-'Abbās Hoveydā, told the parliament later that day that his government had in no conceivable way relinquished or would relinquish its incontestable sovereignty and right of control over the whole island of Abu Musā, the presence of the Sharjah officials in a segment of the island notwithstanding (al-Saud, p. 119. For the text of the speech see Persian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2535 / 1976). The Shaikh of Sharjah stated that the arrangements were temporary and aimed at preventing bloodshed and crisis (al-Saud, p. 119).

While the Memorandum is described with some satisfaction as a *modus vivendi* (e.g., al-Saud, p. 119), to a legal practitioner such diplomatic jargon means little, however. The Memorandum and its attendant diplomatic notes, to the extent supported by requirements of a valid and binding contract, constituted presumptively an enforceable agreement.

Persian Control: 1992 to present. The expiration of the ninth anniversary of the Memorandum fell on 20 April 1981, and by its terms the financial provisions had to be reviewed and presumably reset in the year prior. That may or may not have occurred: Regardless, Persia seems to have continued with some payments to Sharjah until 1984 or so, when payments ceased, supposedly because of the financial drain of the Iran-Iraq War and Arab support for Iraq ("United Arab Emirates – Oil and Natural Gas – Sharjah,"



[http://countrystudies.us /persian-gulf-states/85.htm](http://countrystudies.us/persian-gulf-states/85.htm)). There is no present indication as to how and on what terms and conditions the post-1981 payments were made by Persia.

In April 1992 the Persian officials on Abu Musā barred entry of non-UAE nationals to the area under Sharjah’s control, claiming security concerns. A similar incident in August, coupled with demands for passport and visa formalities from non-UAE visitors to the island, as if they were entering Persian territory, stirred up another wave of condemnation of the Persian presence on the island. By November the matter had subsided and the Persians admitted some of the visitors, as the Persian government now blamed the whole matter on the misjudgment of overzealous minor officials (Marschall, pp. 121-27). In any case, the Persian action had extended beyond the scope of its jurisdiction as set forth in the Memorandum, if still in force.

Occasionally the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council call upon Persia either to turn over Abu Musā (and the Tonbs) to the UAE or submit the island dispute to international adjudication or arbitration. On the other hand, Persia, while steadfastly guarding its sovereignty over the islands, has signaled its willingness to sort out any difference of opinion about the islands in bilateral Persia-UAE negotiations.

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