



TONB ISLANDS

TONB (GREATER AND LESSER), two tiny islands of arguable strategic importance in the eastern Persian Gulf, south of the western tip of Qešm island. They are referred to as Tonb-e Bozorg (26°15' N, 55°18' E) and Tonb-e Kučak (26°14' N, 55°08' E) in Tehran, Ṭunb Kubrā (or Ṭunb) and Ṭunb Suğrā (Nabi Ṭunb) in the Arab capitals. The most common name variations are Ṭonb and Tomb, and there are other combinations of t/ta+a/o/u+n/m+/-b. Previously the name was written by the British as Tomb, Tamb, Tumb.

Present status. The Tonbs are considered by Iran as village units of the **Abu Musā** township (*šahrestān*) in **Hormozgān** Province (Nurbakš, p. 192; Afšār Sistāni, pp. 119, 126). They are claimed by the Shaikhdom of Ras al-Khaimah (Ra's al-Ḳayma, United Arab Emirates) as the successor to the tribal patrimony of the ubiquitous Qāsemi tribe, a branch of which administered the port of Langa for the Persian government from ca. 1789 to 1887 (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 312-60). Lesser Tonb was viewed briefly as having a separate status (Abdullah, pp. 235-36), but in practice its ownership has been determined by that of Greater Tonb (Lorimer, II, p. 1909; Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 96-103).

Geographical description. Greater Tonb lies ca. 27.2 km southwest of Qešm island, ca. 41.6 km south of Langa, and it is ca. 73.6 km north of the Al-Ḥamrā island (peninsula), the closest point on the Arabian littoral. It is circular in shape and measures about 4 km in diameter, rising to the maximum height of 52.5 m. The island's flora consists of coarse grass and shrubs, which cover the island in late winter and early spring, and banyan and palm trees, which occur with greater density in the central and in southwestern areas of the



island. The fauna consists primarily of birds, lizards, and snakes; in the past, it boasted a robust population of goats, antelopes, and hare, which the British officers hunted for recreation. The well water is adequate but brackish. The best approach to the island is found off its eastern coast.

The lesser island lies about 11.2 km to the west, at a distance of 38.4 km from Langa and 72 km from Al-Ḥamrā; 1.6 km long (north to south) and 1.2 km wide at its base in the south, this nearly triangular island rises to about 36 m in height and is devoid of drinking water. The flora consists of a generous cover of the prickly-leaved salsolaceous [salt-tolerant] vegetation. The abundant bird population shares the island with snakes, which are also present in the nearby waters.

As for resources, the islands' prospect for oil has not panned out, while Greater Tonb's red oxide deposits have been proven commercially inferior in the past, and its pearling is all but extinct. Fisheries, therefore, are the sole viable resource of the island for now (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 8-12, based on Lorimer, II, pp. 630, 1908-09; *Persian Gulf Pilot*, pp. 17-18; Nurbakš, pp. 284-85, 289-95; Afšār Sistāni, pp. 105-10, 123-26; Mitchell, p. 566).

Closer to Langa than the Arabian littoral, Greater Tonb “*is indeed geographically a Persian island.*” (British Foreign Office Records, F.O. 371/13777 [1929], Persia E4369/19/34: G. W. Rendel's minutes, 10 September 1929 [emphasis in original], discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 119). The zoogeographic evidence, with respect to the distribution of the Short-nosed Desert Lacerta lizards (*Eremias brevirostris*) on Greater Tonb, suggests that this island was in the distant past connected with the Iranian mainland (Anderson, pp. 318-19).

Early references. The unnamed “other island” noted between Qešm and Farur islands, off which the fleet of the Greek admiral Nearchus moored in 325 B.C.E. (Arrian, *Indica* 37), is conjectured to be Greater Tonb. While the island's identification with Tabiana in Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia* (ca. 168 C.E.) is weak, one may be on firmer ground to conjecture that the name of the island likely figured among the litany of islands off Pārs (Fārs) named in such Persian geographical works as Ebn al-Balkī's (fl. early 12th cent.) *Fārs-nāma*, written ca. 1111 (504 A.H), or in Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi Qazvini's *Nozhat al-qolub*, written ca. 1340 (? 740 A.H.; Mirfendereski, 1996b, pp. 300-301; identified in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 685-98).



Toponymy. The toponymy of Tonb is in all likelihood of Persian origin. In the local Persian dialect(s) of southern Persia, the noun *tonb*, with its diminutive *tonbu*, as it applied to Lesser Tonb (Nāmiuh or Nābiuh Tonb), means “hill” or “low elevation” (Eqtedāri, p. 123). The terms have the same meaning in the larger Dari Persian language system; this explains in part the traces of *tonb* and *tonbu* in the toponyms found in the [Bušehr](#) and Langa regions, some 300 miles (480 km) apart. (Nurbakš, pp. 41, 284-86, citing ’Abbās Anjāmruz, a learned resident of Langa). In addition, there are other toponyms such as Tonb-e Seh in Tangestān and Tonbānu on Qešm island (see Lorimer, II, pp. 1556, 1869, discussed in Mirfendereski, 1996b, pp. 306-7). The traces of the morpheme /tonb/ can be seen also in such 10th-century southern Persian toponyms as Ṭasuj Tonbuk, Ṭamastān, and Tonbuk al-Murestān, as reported in the geography of [Abu Eshāq Ebrāhim Eṣṭakri](#) (d. 960) (discussed in Mirfendereski, 1996b, p. 307).

The absence of the word *tonb* from the Arabic lexicon is held out as evidence of the Iranian character of the toponym, and even of the island (Nurbakš, p. 286). However, this view ignores the plausible origin of the name from Arabic *tunub*, which is written with the letter *tā*, the same as in the earlier Persian spelling of the name (for the earliest reporting of the spelling of the name in Persian/Arabic, see Niebuhr, 1772, p. 328; Persian practice until the 1920s is discussed in Mirfendereski, 1996b, p. 297, n. 1). In Arabic, the word *tonb* connotes “habitat” or place of “settlement” (Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. M. Cowan, Ithaca, N.Y., 1976, p. 570).

The foregoing notwithstanding, there have been a number of quintessential Persian appellations for the Tonbs, even though these forms were not very frequent or long-lived. Chief among them were Nāz (Greater Tonb) and Nāma’an (Lesser Tonb) in reference to the islands’ amenities and lack thereof, respectively, or Gonbad (“dome”), or in reference to snakes (*mār*). The Italian *isola Doma* (“Dome island”) mentioned by Giovanni Ramusio (1550), whether an original European name or a direct translation/corruption of a local name, may well be the link between Ebn Balki’s *Dmh* and Gonbad-e Bozorg and Kučak (Vincent, 1797, p. 357), to Zembo (ca. 1810), likely from Portuguese *zimborio* “dome,” and to Gumbaz (Curzon, 1892, II, p. 448) (discussed in Mirfendereski, 1996b, pp. 301, 304-7).

In the *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, the island which is named “Fomon” (read: Tomon) is identified as Tonb island. While the name *Tomon* may have been in all likelihood the corruption of Tonb from its Persian plural form (? Toman),



the island is given unambiguously by Barbosa as being among the islands which belonged to the kingdom of Ormus [Hormoz] in Persia (Dames, pp. 80-81).

Human geography. Lesser Tonb is not known to have been inhabited, at least on a permanent basis, but the larger one was frequented in successive historical periods by visitors from the Persian and Arabian mainlands for purposes of grazing herds, fishing and pearling, hunting, piracy, red oxide and oil prospecting, recreation and smuggling. Its permanent population originated traditionally from both sides of the Gulf (for details see Lorimer, II, pp. 630, 1908-09; Nurbakš, pp. 284-95; Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 8-13, 112-14, 138-40, 141-51, 168-92, and 1996b, pp. 310-12).

The specifics are wanting with respect to the human settlement on Greater Tonb prior to the middle of the 19th century. The composite picture from a few marine surveys and gazetteers depicted the Tonbs as uninhabited; the flocks of goats or antelopes, however, afforded game to the officers of the vessels lying off Qešm island, and the fisheries attracted fishermen from the Arabian shore for periods of a week or ten days at a time (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 174-76).

Niebuhr, who toured the Persian Gulf in 1763-65, recorded that both Tonbs (Tumb and Namiuh Tumb) were uninhabited. On his way from Mysore in India to Constantinople by way of Basra, in 1786, K̲vāja ‘Abd-al-Qāder found Greater Tonb (written in Persian script as *Ṭm* with the letter *tā*) lying in ruins, but with many herds of deer and a large garden on its (? northern) shore (Mirfendereski, 1996b, pp. 308-9). On the authority of Harford Jones, the factor in Basra at the time and the future British envoy to Persia (1807-11), Vincent’s 1797 description of the islands referred to them as uninhabited, but frequented seasonally by fishermen (Vincent, p. 357).

Not mentioned in the European description of the Tonbs was the fact that Greater Tonb, along with the other islands in its vicinity, often yielded good seasonal pasturage and that invited the various tribes of the Arabian and Persian sides of the Gulf to go to them to graze their herds. Inevitably, concurrent use of an island would degenerate into inter-tribal quarrels. The earliest documented episode of such a perennial grass war dates to 1788-89, when a row between the Qāsemi and Marāziġ of Langa over Greater Farur, Serri, and Abu Musā was mediated by Hādi Khan Bastaki, the Persian governor of the Jahāngira District in southern Persia, whose costal domain

included the area from Bandar ‘Abbās to the west of Langa (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 312-60). By contrast, the settlement of Greater Tonb by the Ebn Jom’a clan in 1856 ended after one year, due to a severe drought on the island. ‘Obayd b. Jom’a of the Āl-e Bu Falāsa section of the Bani Yās tribe, having fallen out with his cousin, the ruler of Dubai, moved his clan of fifteen families with their thirteen pearling boats to Greater Tonb; when the drought hit in 1857, his group abandoned the island and settled on Hangām island farther east (Kabābi, pp. 132-33).

The reports of the grass wars at Greater Tonb in the second half of the 19th century painted a picture of chaos. The Bani Yās, whose earlier proceedings in 1864 on Abu Musā had raised the ire of the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf (Abdullah, p. 233), eventually would establish a presence on Greater Tonb, where they (in two huts) and immigrants from the Persian port of Langa (in one hut) constituted the island’s permanent population in 1908 (Lorimer, II, pp. 1908-09). In 1871-73, the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf were complaining again about the Āl-e Bu Samayt and others from the Persian coast going to Greater Tonb for grazing herds and cutting grass, while at the same time the Qāsemi governor of Langa was grievous about the people from Dubai, ‘Ajmān and Umm al-Qaiwain (Omm al-Qaywayn) being allowed on Greater Tonb (Abdullah, p. 234). The Āl-e Bu Samayt continued to go to Tonb, however, and this resulted in more complaints by the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf in 1877 and 1884; meanwhile the Qāsemi governor of Langa himself had proceeded to plant date offshoots on the island (Abdullah, pp. 236-37).

Even though the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf believed Tonb to be uninhabited in the period 1878-87 (Mirfendereski, 1996a, p. 125), the year-round activities of the governor of Langa and others from the Persian coast with respect to the island proceeded apace. The records dating to 1885 indicated that in that year connected with Tonb were one “Aḥmad of Tamb,” originally from Lār in southern Persia, who engaged in the tobacco trade; the deposed local ruler of Qešm island, who had taken refuge on Tonb under the protection of the governor of Langa; and the mediator nominated by the governor for a dispute on Kiš island, who had been sent previously to settle a matter on Tonb (Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 382, and 1996a, pp. 125-26).

The clamor in 1903-04 over the arrival of the Persian customs service at Tonb, the preemptive planting of the Sharjah (Šarja) flag on the island and its removal by the Persian customs officers, the hoisting of the Persian flag and its subsequent removal, and the re-hoisting of the Sharjah flag was followed in



1912-13 by the installation of a lighthouse on the northern shore of the island. The description of the island as uninhabited by the French vice-consul at Bušehr (1920) may have been the result of the same phenomenon which caused a contemporaneous decline in the populations of Farur (100 percent), Hengām (50 percent), and Kiš (66 percent) (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 179-82). This state of depopulation may have lasted for a while, as a 1927 description of the island described it as barren and uninhabited except for snakes, seafowl, and swallows (Wilson, p. 244).

The population count for Greater Tonb in the period 1929-71 is murky at best, as a proper count itself was influenced by the distance of Tehran and London from the island and the chasm that separated the two governments over the ownership of the island. The Iranian count of 60 inhabitants (30 Arabs and 30 Persians) in 1929 was reduced by the British to 25 Arabs and 4 Persian men, of which the Persians endured the summer on the island while the Arabs left for the lower Gulf. In 1930-31, the British government's own count went from 20 to 30 families (November) to 13 families (January 1931), of which 9 families were Arabs and 4 were Persians. Yet, according to a 1932 British source, the island was barren and uninhabited. In the mid-1930s, an Iranian count had the population consisting of 25 persons, of whom 9 were from the Iranian coast and the rest from Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah, while a British source, reporting on the feasibility of the island as the future site for a football and cricket grounds, put the head count at 50 (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 183-86). By 1938 the population had increased to 100 people (Nurbakš, p. 291).

In 1941, Greater Tonb had a population of 100 people (Afšār Sistāni, p. 117), which increased to 150 by 1950 (Nurbakš, p. 115). In 1953, while one Iranian source put the population count at 100 families (Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 187), another source listed the Tonbs as uninhabited (Razmārā, p. 87). Regardless, a decade later, an Iranian visitor found the island inhabited by 100 souls, who lived by fishing, pearling, and small-scale agriculture; by 1970, the population had soared to 250 people, which was served by a 20-Kw power generator (Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 187). On the last day of British rule in the Gulf (30 November 1971), Reuters News Agency reported the number of the inhabitants at 70 people, but a week later the representative of Ras al-Khaimah told the emergency session of the Arab League that Iran had ferried some 350 inhabitants of the islands to the lower Gulf (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 187-89), while another source put the population at the time at 150 (Nurbakš, p. 293).

The island's population has continued to vary widely—from 200 in 1971-72, down to 100 in 1973-74 (Afšār Sistāni, p. 117), to 81 souls making up 19 families in 1976-77 (Nurbakš, p. 295). In 1977, the Iranian government transplanted 70 families from Langa, Mināb, Hormoz, Qešm, and Bandar 'Abbās to the island, but due to lack of necessities and services the majority of them left the island (Nurbakš, pp. 294-95). In 1980, the population stood at 200 (Afšār Sistāni, p. 117). By 1983, four years after the Revolution of 1978-79, the only inhabitants of the island consisted of Iranian military personnel (Nurbakš, p. 294), no doubt a byproduct of the military situation in the Persian Gulf in the early 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. In 1992, the Tonb population numbered 350 (Afšār Sistāni, p. 117).

In 1983, the infrastructure on Greater Tonb consisted of a primary school, cooperative store, infirmary, power plant consisting of two 100-Kw and one 60-Kw generators, a bath, breakwater, pier, landing strip, two underground water reservoirs, two mosques, a naval station, several streets, fifteen wellheads, several date groves, several three-room houses for teachers, and several administration buildings and residential units left unfinished since 1979 (Nurbakš, pp. 293-94). By 1995, the landing strip was extended to double its original length, the pier was reported in good repair, and the Iranian fisheries organization had begun operating a cold-storage facility (Afšār Sistāni, pp. 120-21). The anecdotal information indicates at present (2003) a population count of less than 200.

The Qāsemi/Langa administration. It has been remarked, in the context of the limits of the Persian empire in the Persian Gulf in the middle of the 18th century, that all the islands off the Persian coast, from Kharqu and Kharaq in the north to Hormoz and Larak in the south, were rightly Persian, though many were in the hands of Arab tribes” (Kelly, 1968, p. 40). Consistent with this, the British in 1800 were also of the belief that “although the King exercises no positive authority over any of [the] islands of the Gulph, those on the northern shore are all considered as part of the Empire” (Kelly 1968, p. 71, citing correspondence of Malcolm to Wellesley, 26 February 1800).

An 1804 map of German origin showed the southern coast of Persia from Cape Bardestān to Bandar 'Abbās as the habitat of the “Bani Hule” tribe and the Tonbs, colored in the same orange hue as the coast, were designated as “Thunb unbenohul” (Christian G. Reichard, *Persien*, 1804, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., Map Room, no. 2275.1804). On another map of the same era, Greater Tonb was given as “Thunb unbenchul” and Lesser Tonb as “Thunb



Namiu” (*Charte von Persien*, Prague, 1811, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., Map Room, no. 2275.1811).

The “Bani Hule” or Howalla or, as they were called pejoratively in Persian folklore, *bani ġul* “children of a monster” (John Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia from the Journals of a Traveller in the East*, Philadelphia, 1928, pp. 27-28), were a loosely defined grouping of peoples of distant Arab (possibly Persian or unknown) origin but with longstanding residence on the Persian coast, in an area from Cape Bardestān to Bandar ‘Abbās (q.v.; Miles, II, pp. 256, 269, 430, 444; Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 309-10 and references therein; Kelly 1968, pp. 17-19; Abdullah, pp. 222, 284, fn. 2). The designation of “unbenohul” and “unbenchul” on the aforementioned maps is no doubt a reference to the Howalla or “Bani Hule.” Regardless of the spelling of the toponym as “Ṭonb,” be it from the Arabic *ṭonb* (abode) or from the Persian *tonb* (hill), the attribution to the larger island of this epithet highlighted the islands’ intimate association with the Persian coast and its inhabitants.

One of the clans belonging to the Howalla or “Bani Hule” of the Persian coast was that of the Qāsemis (or Qawāsem). Their Arab tribal origins are not as clearly established (Kelly, 1968, p. 18) as is, however, their Persian geographical origin immediately prior to their rise to notoriety in the lower Persian Gulf. This occurred in the 18th century (Kelly 1968, pp. 18-19; Miles, II, pp. 269, 430), when they were first the muscle in Nāder Shah’s (r. 1736-47) navy and later pirates and proponents of Wahhabi fundamentalism, which put them at odds with the Omanis due to sectarian differences and in competition with the Bani Yās tribe of Dubai and Abu Dhabi for political and commercial reasons.

Having emigrated from the Persian coast, by the 1720s, the Qāsemi were established as a force in Sharjah and Julfar (Jolfār, Ras al-Khaymah) in the lower Gulf. In the period 1747-59, a branch of the Qāsemi from Sharjah established itself on the Persian littoral, but it was expelled in 1767. By 1780, the Qāsemi branch was re-established on the Persian coast and began to feud with other coastal tribes over pasturage in the islands off Langa. In 1788-89, Hādi Khan Bastaki, the Persian governor of the Jahāngira District in southern Persia, proceeded to Langa, mediated the quarrel between the Qāsemi and Marāziġ over grazing rights on Greater Farur, Serri, and Abu Musā, and a short time later delegated to a Qāsemi shaikh the administration of Langa (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 312-60).

The outpouring of the Bani Yās to the islands in the eastern sector of the Gulf prompted the Qāsemi shaikh of Sharjah in 1864 to complain to the British Resident, the representative of Britain in the Persian Gulf, about the people from Dubai going to Abu Musā, presumably interfering with his subjects on the island. The Resident ignored the complaint, and subsequently the shaikh complained again. This time he claimed that since the days of his forefathers Greater Tonb and Abu Musā had belonged to him, Serri had belonged to the Qāsemi of Langa, and Farur to the Marāziḡ (Abdullah, p. 233). Arguably, what was being claimed by the shaikh as ownership of the islands was no more than the regulation of grazing rights such as Hādi Khan Bastaki had undertaken among the Qāsemi and Marāziḡ at Langa in the previous century.

In 1872, the Qāsemi shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah complained to the Qāsemi governor of Langa about the Āl-e Bu Samayt of the Persian coast going to Greater Tonb. The governor wrote back in November 1872, ignoring the shaikh's grievance about the Āl-e Bu Samayt and asking instead that the shaikh prevent the passage of others from the lower Gulf to the island. The governor's second response to another complaint by the shaikh reiterated his earlier position but acknowledged the ownership of the island as belonging to the Qāsemi of Oman (Abdullah, pp. 235).

The Āl-e Bu. Samayt, however, continued to cross over to Greater Tonb, and this generated another complaint, this time by the shaikh to the Resident, who, in 1873, instructed his agent at Sharjah to look into the matter. The agent instructed the shaikh to keep off Greater Tonb until he could review the matter, in which the Qāsemi governor of Langa claimed the Tonbs as belonging to him, and the shaikh claimed Greater Tonb as his own but conceded Lesser Tonb as belonging to the Qāsemi of Langa. In March 1873, the agent visited Greater Tonb and thereafter instructed the shaikh to either remove his horses from the island or apologize to the governor of Langa for their presence there. In April, the agent reported to the Resident that the island was a dependency of the Persian province of Fārs and under the chief of Langa. The Resident approved the agent's report, and the shaikh accordingly was ordered to remove his horses from the island (Abdullah, pp. 234-36).

Having lost his case in the first instance, the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah reopened the matter with another complaint to the governor of Langa about the proceedings of the Āl-e Bu Samayt on Greater Tonb. In January 1877, the governor reportedly wrote back, acknowledging that the island was a



dependency of the Qāsemi of Oman and he would prohibit the Āl-e Bu Samayṭ from going there (Abdullah, p. 236). The Resident was thrust into the matter again when the shaikh complained in 1879 of the Āl-e Bu Samayṭ on the island. Under the Resident's order, the agent at Langa prepared a report on the dependencies of the shaikhdoms of the lower Gulf and it mentioned Greater Tonb as the joint property of the Qāsemi of Langa and Ras al-Khaimah. The Resident, however, noted about the island in the margin "considered Persian" (Abdullah, p. 236).

In 1881, the Resident's agent in Sharjah reportedly collected the aforementioned letters which had been written by the governor of Langa in 1872 and 1877 and forwarded them to the Resident, possibly to secure a reversal of the Resident's earlier determination. The matter lingered in abeyance, and no change was made to the Resident's earlier judgement on the matter (Abdullah, pp. 236-37).

In 1884, the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah sent word to the Qāsemi governor of Langa complaining about the governor's date trees on Greater Tonb and the Āl-e Bu Samayṭ's cutting of grass there. The governor wrote back saying that he, God willing, would prevent such activities, and stated that the island belonged to the Qāsemi of Oman and, if it was alright by the shaikh, he, the governor, should continue to keep his hand over it (Abdullah, p. 237).

In February 1887, the Persian central government reorganized the ports of Bušehr, Langa, and Bandar 'Abbās, together with their dependent districts and islands, into a new administrative unit called the Persian Gulf Ports and placed it under the charge of a member of the Qajar royal family. In September, the Qāsemi governorship of Langa was dissolved, and four days later a Persian garrison of 30 men, two cannons, and a flagstaff landed on Serri island (Lorimer, I, pp. 289, 2056-57, 2066; Abdullah, pp. 238-39; Curzon, II, p. 410), the port's farthest offshore dependency. The detachment which headed to Serri had planned to land also on Greater Tonb but inexplicably did not do so (Abdullah, p. 239; Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 421), probably because the island at the time may have not been inhabited (Mirfendereski, 1996a, p. 125; Abdullah, p. 241).

Colonial determinations: considered Persian. The expulsion of the Qāsemi from the government of Langa and the landing of the Persian troops on Serri "excited a good deal of antipathy at the time," but the Arab inhabitants of the area "soon settled down to the new order of things" (Curzon, II, p. 410). There



was hardly anything new in the new order of things. The claims of the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf to the various islands off Langa, including the intra-Qawāsim correspondence (discussed above) with the Qāsemi governors of Langa, had been known to the British authorities in the Persian Gulf, and yet no heed was paid to them by the British government prior to 1887. Nor had the Persian government recognized any Qāsemi ownership rights in the islands.

If anything, in the period 1786-1835 the official British opinion, surveys, and maps identified the Tonbs as part of Langa, subject to the government of the province of Fārs. Chief among them were the works of Lt. John McCluer (1786), political counselor John Macdonald Kinneir (1813), and Lt. George Barns Brucks (1829) (Bavand, pp. 83-84 and sources cited therein).

In 1835, the Bani Yās attacked an English ship off Greater Tonb. In the ensuing maritime peace arranged by the Resident Samuel Hennell, a restrictive line was established between Abu Musā and Serri islands, and pledges were obtained from the tribes of the lower Gulf not to venture their war boats north of the line. In view of Serri and Abu Musā being pirate lairs themselves, Hennell's successor, Major James Morrison, in January 1836, modified the restrictive line so that it then ran from Sham on the Trucial Coast to a point ten miles south of Abu Musā to Şir Abu No'ayr island. (Kelly 1968, pp. 355-59; Bavand, pp. 80-81). In either of its configurations, the restrictive line placed the Tonbs outside of the reach of the war boats of the Qāsemi, Bani Yās, and other tribes of the lower Gulf.

The restrictive line may have functioned also as a clear delineation of the outer limits of Langa's area of offshore jurisdiction, giving further evidence of the islands' appurtenance to Persia. This was particularly significant in light of an 1844 list compiled by the British Assistant Resident A.B. Kemball, which identified the Al-Ḥamrā island off the coast of Ras al-Khaimah as the only island belonging to the Qāsemi chief of the lower Gulf (Bavand, p. 83; Miles, pp. 281, 428, 442-48).

The 1835 maritime truce was made permanent in 1853 after a series of earlier extensions (Kelly, 1968, pp. 358-59, 366-68, 403-9). One of the hallmarks of the truce from the start was the institution of a system of notification and redress of grievances under the auspices of the Resident's office (Kelly 1968, p. 358). Force being no longer a viable option for settlement of disputes, especially on the part of the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf (Kelly 1968, pp. 403-6), the enforcement of Qāsemi's claims to islands such as Abu Musā and Greater Tonb



became a subject for the British colonial administration in the Persian Gulf. In that context, as discussed in the preceding section, the Resident and its agents on several occasions (1864, 1873, 1879, 1881) had been seized with the question of the ownership of the Tonbs, but the British government had refused to go along with the claims of the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf.

In the period 1836-86 the official British surveys, maps, and administrative reports continued to identify the Tonbs as part of Langa, subject to the government of Fārs province. Among them were the works of Lt. Colonel Robert Taylor (1836), the Resident A.B. Kemball (1854), the Resident Lewis Pelly (1864), *The Persian Gulf Pilot* (1864), an admiralty publication (Bavand, pp. 84-85 and sources cited therein), the 1870 (second) edition of *The Persian Gulf Pilot* (Abdullah, p. 234), and the 1886 *Map of Persia*, which was issued by the intelligence branch of the British war office and showed the Tonbs in the color of Persia (cited and discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 402-3, and 1996a, pp. 128; Abdullah, pp. 238, 242).

Imperial considerations. The shaikh of Sharjah asked the Resident to protest the Persian actions on Serri and hoped the British would prevent a similar occurrence at Greater Tonb. (Abdullah, p. 239-40). The Persian actions on Serri had taken place in an aggressive manner and against the backdrop of German interest in fitting Persia with naval capabilities and a renewed Russian interest in the Gulf. To the greater consternation of the British, the agents of the Persian government also had begun to court the shaikhdoms of the lower Gulf, enticing them to replace their treaty relations with Britain with direct relations with Persia (Lorimer, I, pp. 290, 289, 737, 920, 7047-48; Abdullah, pp. 238-39).

A protest in search of a theory soon found great usefulness in the previously discarded Qāsemi claims to Greater Tonb and the intra-Qawasem correspondence, in which the Qāsemi governor of Langa had made admissions that the islands belonged to the Qāsemi of Oman. On the side of the Qāsemi shaikhs of the lower Gulf, Britain now recognized the Qāsemi claim that Serri and Greater Tonb had been the hereditary possessions of the Qāsemi tribe and that, as such, they belonged to the Qāsemi tribal patrimony (Curzon, II, p. 409-10).

Based on this theory of the Qāsemi tribal patrimony, the British protested the Persian actions on Serri. The Persian government replied that the islands were a part of Langa and the Qāsemi administration of them was by virtue of their



appointment as the governors of the port. In rejoinder, the Anglo-Qāsemi view stated that the Qāsemi were already in possession of the islands as their own property before their investment as governors of Langa by the Persian government. (Abdullah, pp. 237-41; Schofield, pp. 35-36).

By August 1888, Britain decided to acquiesce in the Persian actions on Serri (Mirfendereski, 1996a, p. 128), leaving alone the concerns over Tonb, even though the Persian government's rebuff of the British protests had coupled their claim to Serri with one to Tonb (Abdullah, pp. 239-41). The British regard for the Persian claim to Serri (and perhaps Tonb) was affected significantly by the depiction of the Tonbs and Serri in the same color as that of Persia in the 1886 *Map of Persia*, which Nāser-al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-96) of Persia now astutely cited against the British when they protested the Persian actions on Serri (Mirfendereski, 1996a, p. 128; Abdullah, p. 242). The British acquiescence in the Persian claim to Serri demeaned the very theory on which the protest had been based.

The Qāsemi administrators of Langa were of the same original stock as the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf; however, their rise on the Persian littoral and to the political administration of Langa and its dependencies were attributable primarily to their distance from the politics and piratical activities of their kinsmen in Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 311-60, and 1996a, pp. 123-24; Bavand, p. 81). Consequently, when the British government pacified the tribes of the lower Gulf, which it had labeled as "pirates" (hence the term "Pirate Coast"), in a series of naval engagements in the early 1800s, and then exacted from them a general surrender in 1820 and a maritime truce in the 1830s (hence the term "Trucial" Shaikhdoms), the Qāsemi of the Persian coast were spared the ravages and humiliation suffered by their namesake in the lower Gulf (Kelly, 1968, pp. 99-166, 193-259, 354-409).

The view that the Qāsemi of Langa had administered the Tonbs, Abu Musā, and Serri islands as the lieutenants of the Qāsemi of the lower Gulf was rebutted in the later years by a legal adviser at the British foreign office in 1932 and the head of its eastern department in 1934 (Bavand, p. 82).

The prior British understanding of the status of the Tonbs and other islands and the recent British acquiescence in the Persian claim to Serri were reflected in the 1891 edition of the *Map of Persia* (1886), which was reissued by the British war office and showed the islands in the color of Persia (F.O. 371/18917 1935, Arabia E2145/653/91: Mr. Lambert's minutes, dated 29 May



1935; Foreign office map Room, no. 2723). Less official but of greater significance, was the 1891 compilation of the *Map of Persia* by William T. Turner of the Royal Geographical Society under the supervision of Curzon, then a member of Parliament. Published in 1892, the Turner map depicted the Tonbs, Abu Musā, and Serri in the same pink color as Persia (Curzon, I, map, inside back cover). The significance of this map was that it hinted at Curzon's own acceptance of the Persian claim to the islands, as signified in his statement that, despite the objections to the Persian actions on Serri, one had "settled to the new order of things" (Curzon, II, p. 410). Consistent with this view was the identification of Bahrain in a color other than Persia, signifying the British view that it did not recognize Persia's longstanding claim to Bahrain. The work to which the map was appended identified the Tonbs by their English name of Tomb (Tanb by some) and their Persian appellation as Gumbaz (Gonbads), with no specific reference to an Arabic name.

In 1892, the Royal Geographical Society (London) published the *Map of Persia, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan*, on which the Tonbs, Serri and Abu Musā were depicted in the same pink color as the Persian mainland. More significant than the depiction of the islands in the color of Persia was the diligence that had gone into the compilation of the map, leaving little room for haphazard omissions or mistaken information. In 1897, the Government of India's drawing office at Simla compiled and issued its *Survey of India: Map of Persia*, which depicted the islands in the same green color as Persia (discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 436-37, and 1996a, p. 132).

Besides the Persian territorial and political ambitions in the Persian Gulf, in the period 1888-1903 the British government was worried equally about French intrigues, and Russian and German naval and economic interests in the region. It had already been determined by the British that the Persian actions on Serri and elsewhere in the Gulf were inspired by Russia. In pursuit of a forward policy based on Curzon's views, which included the marking of the territories under their direct and indirect colonial control, the British government undertook a project by which to erect flagstaffs in a number of locations in the Gulf (Lorimer, II, p. 920; Busch, pp. 37-48, 114-32, 236-69; Abdullah, pp. 238-40; Mirfendereski, 1999, pp. 67-71, and 1985, pp. 441-55).

The arrival of the Persian customs administration to the Persian coast and islands under the efficient control of its Belgian contractors in 1901-02 foretold of the impending establishment of posts on Serri, Abu Musā and Greater Tonb (Lorimer, I, pp. 2594-97, 2602-07; Mirfendereski, 1999, pp. 64-66, and 1985, pp.

453-55). In January 1903, a group of merchants at Langa indicated that they wished to move their commerce offshore, presumably away from the reach of the Persian customs, for which purpose Abu Musā was suggested as a port of call. The Resident predicted a Persian backlash, which could result in a row over the ownership of the island (Abdullah, p. 244; Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 453). In order to preempt any Persian action as to Abu Musā and Tonb, the Resident urged the shaikh of Sharjah to hoist his flag on Abu Musā as a sign of ownership of the island, which was done in April 1903. As to Tonb, the Resident had urged caution because any forward policy could provoke the Persian occupation of the island. The British authorities in India overruled the Resident, and so in July 1903 the shaikh hoisted his flag on Tonb as well (Parker, Part I, and Laithwaite, pt. IV, pars. 17-18, discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 455-57; Lorimer, I, p. 745; Abdullah, p. 244).

In the pursuit of British imperial considerations the lack of regard for Persian sensibilities was no vice. Already, in 1901 a British government memorandum openly suggested that, where strategic necessity required, Britain would seize any of the Persian islands (Busch, pp. 244-45) and in March 1902 Curzon recommended that the British navy hoist a flag on Qešm island in the case of necessity (Busch, p. 249). This was also the echo of another time, 1820, when, in its attempt to garner a base on the Persian soil in the Gulf and against the wishes of the Persian government, the British chargé d'affaires in Tehran mused that "it was possible that the right and title of the Shah to all the islands in the Gulph might be questioned" (Kelly, 1968, pp. 169-70, citing Willock to Keir, 10 March 1820).

In March 1904, a contingent from the Imperial Persian Customs Service on board the service's steamer *Moẓaffari*, led by a Belgian officer, landed at Abu Musā and the Tonbs. It removed the Sharjah flags and raised the Persian standard, and posted two riflemen at each site to guard the flag. Though visited, no flag or guard was posted on Lesser Tonb (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 457-58, based on Parker, pt. I; Laithwaite, Part IV, par. 19; F.O. 371/506 1908, Arabia E34/31418: Morley to Grey, 7 September 1908; Lorimer, I, p. 745). In Tbilisi, in the Russian empire, the semi-official daily *Soki Listuk* in an April 1904 article entitled "Persia's Foot: Persia, Britain and International Law" lauded the Persian decision to haul down the British flag on the islands (Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 601). In the view of the British government, however, Persia's "high-handed proceedings" at Abu Musā and Tonbs "though carried out by a Customs officer, had been initiated by the Mushir-ud-Dauleh [Mošir-



al-Dawla], Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs, most probably under Russian advice” (Lorimer, I, p. 745).

Not only had the Persian actions threatened the “naval position of Great Britain in the Persian Gulf” (Lorimer, I, p. 745), but the political relations between the shaikhdoms and Britain also were challenged, as the shaikh of Sharjah now demanded that the Persian presence be removed from Abu Musā and Tonb. The British authorities in India proposed to dispatch a gunboat to the islands in order to lower the Persian flags, hoist the Sharjah flag, and remove the Persian guards to Persia. The foreign office won the day and instead a diplomatic protest was lodged in Tehran (Parker, pt. I; Laithwaite, pt. IV, par. 20). On 24 May, the British minister in Tehran reported that orders were issued by the Persian government to remove the flags, while “reserving their right to discuss with His Majesty’s Government the respective claims to the islands” (Parker, pt. I, citing Hardinge to FO, tel. [telegram] no. 16, 24 May 1904). On the same day, he reported to the foreign office a statement made by the Belgian head of the Persian customs service that Persia’s claim to Serri and Tonb were “sound” but “doubtful” as to Abu Musā (ibid., tel. no. 91, 24 May 1904).

On 14 June 1904, the Persian government removed its presence from Abu Musā and Greater Tonb (Lorimer, I, pp. 745-46), subject to the reservations, as reported by the British minister. In a note to the British minister, the Persian foreign minister stated that neither party should hoist flags in the islands until the settlement of the question of ownership (Laithwaite, pt. IV, par. 20, citing Hardinge to FO, 14 June 1904). The British minister rejected this expectation the next day, insisting instead that the shaikh of Sharjah had hoisted his flag on Abu Musā and Tonb as the “first occupant” of islands “which were not yet formally occupied by any other Government,” and he had the right to keep it flying “till his lawful possession of these islands is disproved” (Parker, pt. I, citing Hardinge to FO, no. 104, 15 June 1904). On 17 June 1904, acting under the instructions of the resident, the shaikh of Sharjah had his flag re-hoisted on Abu Musā and Greater Tonb. “Flagstaffs were erected on Tamb and Abu Musā and guards stationed,” wrote the Resident, “and the Chiefs and inhabitants of the Pirate Coast were glad, and felt assured that the British Government would protect them versus enemies and would maintain their honor, and the people highly praised the British Government” (Parker, pt. I, citing Maj. Percy Z. Cox to India Office, 20 September 1904).

In the Iranian annals of the diplomatic history of the Tonbs and Abu Musā, the

Persian agreement to withdraw from the islands on 14 June 1904, subject to reservations, is known as the “status quo agreement.” The re-flagging of the islands by Sharjah three days after the withdrawal of the Persians violated the status quo agreement, rendering moot the legal relevance of any subsequent presence and activity by Sharjah on the islands and also any by Ras al-Khaimah with respect to the Tonbs from 1921 onward (see ‘Abdoh, *Jazāyer-e Tonb wa Abu Musā* (The islands of Tonb and Abu Musā), a secret memorandum, foreign ministry no. 688, 8 Ordibehešt 1332 [April 1953], conclusion no. 1, discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 462-64; cf. Lorimer, I, pp. 745-46, denying the existence of a status quo agreement).

Anglo-Qāsemi administration. In the period from 17 June 1904 until the recognition of Ras al-Khaimah as a separate shaikhdom by Britain on 7 June 1921, the Tonbs remained under the administration of the shaikh of Sharjah. From 7 June 1921 until 30 November 1971 the islands were administered by the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah. In the sixty-six intervening years, the islands endured as a sore spot in Anglo-Persian relations, with Britain defending the position of its protected wards and Persia taking every opportunity to reiterate its claim to the islands.

Three days after Sharjah re-hoisted its flag on Abu Musā and Greater Tonb, on 20 June 1904, the Persian government protested the occupation of the island to the British legation in Tehran. When it was rumored that the shaikh of Sharjah was erecting a building on Greater Tonb, the Persian government at once objected in May 1905, and in August of the next year a British sloop visited the island to ensure that the shaikh of Sharjah’s flag and flagstaff were kept in good repair. In 1908-09, a British mineral company’s interest in exploring for red oxide on the Tonbs came to naught, even though the British government had directed the company to negotiate with the shaikh of Sharjah through the Resident. In 1912-13 the British government installed a lighthouse on Greater Tonb. In connection with this, the Resident assured the shaikh that the island will be preserved for him by the mere presence of the lighthouse (F.O., 371/1717 1913, Arabia E34/926: Resident to shaikh Saqr bin Khaled [Ṣaqr b. Kāled], 28 September 1912). After the Persian government objected no less than three times to the erection of the lighthouse on Tonb without its permission, the British legation in Tehran obfuscated the issue by stating in February 1913 that the *phare* (beacon) was required for navigation purposes and Britain was undertaking this installation because Persia could not afford it (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 512-16, 536-39, and 1996a, pp. 137-38).



In April 1923, a Persian red oxide concessionaire urged the government to assert yet again its claim to Abu Musā and the Tonbs and, coupled with the claim to Bahrain, submit the entire matter to the League of Nations for disposition. The British diplomatic opposition to this renewed interest by the Persian government intimated a possible use of force to thwart any Persian ambitions in this regard. “It is repugnant,” wrote Curzon, “that Great Britain should be brought to an arbitration on a question of sovereignty by a third class power like Persia ... [it] is dangerous to entrust such important interests to the risks of arbitration by a single individual” (F.O. 371/11442 1926, Arabia E419/419/91, Loraine to Chamberlain, 30 December 1925, citing Curzon to Loraine, tel. no. 88, 1 May 1923).

Two years later, in 1925-26, the two governments were back at it exchanging claims over the islands, this time in consequence of the removal of a bag of red oxide from Abu Musā by the Persian customs officials (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 540-41). The Persian government’s seizure of a boat sailing under the flag of Dubai in the waters off Greater Tonb on the suspicion of contraband caused another dust-up in 1928-29, at the end of which the British government compensated the aggrieved for their ordeal (discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 541-90; Abdullah, pp. 257-62).

In the midst of the Dubai dhow controversy, a Persian customs boat landed at Greater Tonb in November 1928 and reported that the British flag was flying over the island. Although detected by the British navy, the visit went unchallenged. In 1930, the Persian government brought the substance of the report to the attention of the British negotiators in the context of the broader Anglo-Persian political negotiations underway at the time. A variety of possible solutions were proposed and counter-proposed with respect to the status of Bahrain, Serri, the Tonbs, and Abu Musā; but none was acceptable, and so at the end the entire negotiations broke down in 1935.

The different proposals to settle the dispute over the islands included: (1) recognition of Serri as Persian in return for the Persian recognition of the Tonbs and Abu Musā as belonging to the Qāsemi; (2) recognition of the Tonbs as Persian in return for Persia’s recognition of Abu Musā as Qāsemi; (3) sale or leasing of the Tonbs by Persia from the Qāsemi. The subsequent rumor in 1933 that the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah was thinking of leasing Greater Tonb to the Persian government caused yet another dust-up, which resulted in the shaikh giving up the idea under British pressure in 1935 (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 559-61, 615-40). By February 1935, the various departments of the British

government were unanimous in one sentiment: “[We] would not really like the Persians to have Tamb in any circumstances” (F.O. 371/18901 1935, Arabia E814/4/91: Mr. Baggallay’s minutes of the inter-departmental conference of 6 February 1935). A month later, this view was adopted by the British cabinet (ibid., Arabia E1670/4/91: Minutes of the Middle East [Official] Sub-Committee, 8 March 1935, Part II: The island of Tamb).

In September 1929, the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah’s flag was reported flying on Greater Tonb, and two years later there was a report that the shaikh collected a hauler’s share from each of the four pearling boats which belonged to the Arabs of the island (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 520-21). In April 1933, a Persian delegation consisting of the governor of Bandar ‘Abbās and his chief of police and collector of customs visited the island for a walk and inspected the lighthouse. The news of the visit did not reach an action level until a full year later; it now included an allegation of bribery on the part of the Persians to have the shaikh’s flag lowered by the keeper. The British decided not to object to the Persian visit because it had become the policy of the government to “avoid ... anything in the nature of a needless challenge to Persia, especially in matters connected with the Persian Gulf” (F.O. 371/17827 1934 Arabia E4042/3283/91 G. W. Rendel to Undersecretary of State for India, 2 July 1934). However, when a Persian naval contingent, along with a French surveyor and an Italian engineer, visited the island in July 1933, the British delivered a protest note to the Persian government in August of that year. Similarly, two more Persian naval visits to Greater Tonb in August and September 1934 drew further British protests (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 559-73).

In January 1935, the British naval officer reported on the local administrator of the village of Basidu on Qešm island, who had sought out a Tonb resident to carry to the island a letter from Tehran, which this latter had refused. The naval officer also reported that the director of customs at Bandar ‘Abbās was about to visit the island in February, but this did not materialize. In April, however, the governor of Bandar ‘Abbās sent a letter to the headman on Tonb, enclosing three copies of “the esteemed Decree of His Imperial Majesty relating to the Elections of the 10th Period of the Majles for immediate circulation” (F.O. 371/18901 1935, Arabia E712/4/91: Political resident to H.M.’s minister, no. 23, 30 January 1935; Arabia E3204/4/91: Knatchbull-Hugessen to G. W. Rendel, 3 May 1935). Britain decided not to protest, because it was not worth pursuing the matter, especially since there was no evidence that the dispatch had been engineered from Tehran (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 573-74).



In April 1939, the Iranian government submitted to the parliament a bill for the ratification of an agreement which it had entered into with a Dutch company for the exploitation of the country's mineral resources. The area defined as "Area II" embraced an area that included the Tonbs and Abu Musā. The British minister in Tehran brought the matter to the attention of his Dutch counterpart in Tehran with the caution that the islands did not belong to Iran and that the company could not work them. Subsequently, the foreign office rebuffed the minister's suggestion that he make a formal representation about this matter to the Dutch minister and the Persian government: The first one was deemed inappropriate, and the second one was not necessary. Instead, the British naval officer in the Persian Gulf was ordered to keep an eye on the Dutch company's activities in the Gulf (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 575-77).

On the basis of the Iranian documentation on the subject, in the period 1940-68 the various departments of the Iranian government engaged in a number of activities with respect to the Tonbs, challenging the Anglo-Qāsemi position there (Mirfendereski, 1996a, pp. 139-40). In December, 1940 it was reported that a resident of the island, named Sālem b. Solṭān, who claimed to be a British subject, was cruising near Lesser Tonb and collecting tolls from the passing ships, issuing to them receipts in the name of the Iranian navy. Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) considered the procedure rather ordinary, considering that island belonged to Iran (Mirfendereski, 1985, p. 578).

From May 1948 through May 1953, the Iranian government sought on a number of occasions to formulate a policy by which it could regain control of Abu Musā and the Tonbs. In August 1949, the prime minister instructed the Iranian ambassador in London to raise the issue of the restoration of Iran's rights to the islands, while the foreign ministry urged the installation of a symbol of Iranian ownership on Lesser Tonb, the uninhabited rock with oil potential. Later in the month, the British legation in Tehran rejected the foreign minister's earlier requirement that the British not interfere in Iran's imminent exercise of sovereignty over the Tonbs. The Iranian war ministry's suggestion in September 1949 to install a garrison on Greater Tonb, however, was rejected by the foreign ministry, because it was feared the measure would cause most severe consequences for the country. Preference was given to the settlement of the matter by recourse to the international authorities (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 579-81).

A commission of inquiry headed by the director-general of the Iranian foreign ministry was established in April 1953 to look into Iran's options with respect

to the Tonbs and Abu Musā. The use of force was quickly dismissed for its feared diplomatic, political and economic consequences. The idea of appealing to the United Nations was dismissed, because the matter hardly threatened international peace and security. The idea of a third-party arbitration and indirect talks with the shaikhs of Sharjah (Abu Musā) and Ras al-Khaimah (Tonbs) was rejected. The commission settled for the referral of the issue to the International Court of Justice, where Iran had managed to obtain in July 1952 a favorable decision in the case involving the Iranian nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (q.v.). In any event, the commission warned, the matter could not be left silent (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 581-82).

The overflight by the British Royal Air Force over the Tonbs and Abu Musā in May 1953 invited a sharp rebuke from the Iranian government. In November, an inter-departmental delegation, consisting of the representatives of Iran's foreign and interior ministries, national defense council, and customs administration visited the islands incognito. In his report, the head of the group recommended that 50 riflemen, equipped with artillery, land and set up wireless stations on Greater Tonb and Abu Musā. In November of the next year the Iranian government formed the Governorate-General of the Ports and Islands of the Persian Gulf, by which Greater Tonb was incorporated into the Qešm island district, while Lesser Tonb and Abu Musā were incorporated into the Kiš island district (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 583-84).

Reports by the Iranian intelligence service in 1960 depicted the Tonbs, Abu Musā, Serri, and the Farurs as neglected (*matruk*, lit. "forlorn, abandoned") and out of the reach of the central government. Moḥammad-Rezā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-79) instructed that unobtrusive and gradual measures be taken to reassert governmental control over them, with such innocuous steps as setting up a weather monitoring station. Iran's national security council ordered the intelligence service to carry out the plan. In September 1961, an Iranian army helicopter landed on Greater Tonb to demarcate the location for the weather station. The plan was scuttled in the ensuing whirlwind of diplomatic protests and counter-protests between Tehran and London (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 584-85, citing SAVAK to foreign ministry, no. 3370, 11 Kordād 1339; British embassy to foreign ministry, no. 1084/61, 23 Šahrivar 1340, foreign ministry to British embassy, no. 3052, 30 Šahrivar 1340; British embassy to foreign ministry, no. 1084/62, 23 Dey 1340; foreign ministry to British embassy, no. 5724, 30 Dey 1340).

In November 1965 the Iranian intelligence service reported on the shaikh of



Ras al-Khaimah's intention to construct an airport and naval base on Greater Tonb and claim the island's continental shelf. The Iranian foreign ministry noted that the government should not allow the shaikh's intended activities to weaken the country's claim to the islands and encroach on Iran's continental shelf. No action was taken, however. In December 1967, Iran's interior ministry complained that nothing had been done to remove the shaikh's flag from the island. The foreign ministry urged the prime minister to lodge a protest with the British government and instruct the navy to go and bring down the shaikh's flag. The Iranian prime minister convened an inter-departmental meeting in January, and it decided that an immediate protest be made to London. An Iranian protest on 8 January to the British embassy demanded the removal of the shaikh's flag and guards from the islands. Three days later the Iranian destroyer *Bāyandor* began to patrol in Tonb waters. The Royal Air Force buzzed the ship, and the Iranian foreign ministry complained to the British embassy about the harassment of Iranian ships in international waters, to which the British responded with a protest about the *Bāyandor*'s presence in Ras al-Khaimah's waters. On the next day, Iran rejected the British protest and asked that the shaikh cease his provocations, so that the issue might be resolved by negotiations.

Meanwhile a civilian boat, which had been dispatched to Tonb on orders from the Shah, reported on 14 January that the son of the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah, two British nationals, and two coolies had arrived on the island on board a British helicopter to survey the island for the purposes of stationing a 20-man police detachment. With the exception of the shaikh (headman) of the island and the local mullah (cleric), the rest of the inhabitants had gone to Dubai to grease their boats. On 15 January, the *Bāyandor* reported the harassment of the Iranian cruiser *Hormoz* in international waters by British airplanes. On the next day, the Iranian navy reported that it was engaged in the vigilant patrol of the Tonb waters (Mirfendereski 1985, pp. 586-89).

Iranian restoration. On 16 January 1968, the prime minister Harold Wilson's (1916-95) government announced that Great Britain would withdraw her forces from the Persian Gulf and the Far East by the end of 1971. In the next three years, Britain and Iran engaged in a protracted series of negotiations with respect to the future of Britain's treaty clients in the Persian Gulf. Ultimately, Qatar and Bahrain became independent countries, which Iran agreed to recognize. The shaikhdoms of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Ajman (ʿAjmān), Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah (Fojayra), which is



not on the Gulf proper, formed the federation of the United Arab Emirates, which Iran agreed to recognize on the condition that Iran gain control of Abu Musā and the Tonbs. A multi-faceted memorandum of understanding, brokered by the British government on 24-30 November 1971, provided for an arrangement between Iran and Sharjah. With respect to the Tonbs, the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah held out and refused to negotiate with the Iranian government, even though he was warned by Britain that Iran would pounce (Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 20-54, based on McMunn, pp. 32, 48-53, 60-61, 69-71, 103-13; Kelly, 1980, pp. 49-59, 87-95; Chubin and Zabih, pp. 215-22, Ramazani, 1975, pp. 410-16; the *Iran-Sharjah Memorandum of Understanding*, 24-30 November 1971, is reprinted in Amirahmadi, Appendix 1, pp. 162-75).

The secret decision to take over the islands by a show of force was made toward the end of October 1971. The Shah informed the head of his naval staff, chief-admiral Faraj-Allāh Rasā'i, of this at a meeting in which he also made the point that the British had agreed finally to return the islands to Iran. The admiral left the palace with the knowledge that he had been let in a secret shared only by the Shah and the British ambassador (Rasā'i, p. 48, col. 1). It was now necessary to move some of the navy's assets to the eastern Gulf, closer to Bandar 'Abbās and the islands, without raising suspicion. The upcoming Navy Day on 5 November provided a suitable cover for the required deployments. The Shah approved the plan, the news of the Navy Day maneuvers was made public, and the admiral headed to Bandar 'Abbās. On the way, on board the destroyer *Artemis*, the flagship of Iran's southern navy, the admiral sought an audience with the Shah on Kiš island, where he received the operational details of the plan: "The British will be ending their oversight of the islands on 30 November," the Shah told him, "and so before anyone else has a chance we must have our people placed on them precisely past midnight of 29 November" (ibid.).

For the next fifteen days, the Iranian navy conducted dawn-to-dusk operations at sea, while the headquarters determined where the destroyers should be positioned in relation to the three islands. On 29 November, the admiral included in two envelopes the operational time-and-place orders of the vessels, helicopters, hovercrafts and the sea-rangers or marines (*takāvarān*) and entrusted each envelope to a group commander with instructions to open and carry out the orders to the letter upon receiving code *ālfā* "Alpha" from the *Artemis*. The admiral and the flagship then proceeded from Bandar 'Abbās to a point off Langa, where the amphibious units and the *takāvarān* were



stationed. At 23:50 hours, the admiral issued the code to all the units participating in the operations, and so each of the two destroyer groups started in the direction of their destinations. The *Artemis* took up its position off Abu Musā, and the Tonb naval task force consisting of the destroyers *Bāyandor* and *Naqdi* and led by admiral Kamāl Ḥabīb-Allāhi moved into position near the Tonbs. The Iranian contingent led by Rear-Admiral Ramzi ‘Aṭā’i landed on Abu Musā and was greeted by the brother of the shaikh of Sharjah, who then proceeded to pay a visit to the admiral on board the *Artemis* (ibid., cols. 1-3).

On Greater Tonb, however, operations did not go smoothly. The Iranian military was under orders from the Shah that there should be no bloodshed, to fire only if fired upon. After landing on the island in their hovercrafts, the Iranian contingent was moving on the police barracks when a burst of machine gun fire from inside claimed the lives of three Iranian marines and left one wounded. The situation was communicated to the *Artemis*. Admiral Rasā’i ordered that the police barrack be taken by the *takāvarān*. A three-officer contingent who had been on Abu Musā lifted off in a helicopter and headed to Greater Tonb to lead the attack on the police post. This was accomplished without further casualty to the Iranian forces, but five lay dead and one wounded on the Ras al-Khaimah side of the fray. The remaining Ras al-Khaimah force and its Tonb civilian sympathizers were disarmed. As Lesser Tonb was uninhabited, no operations took place there (Rasā’i, cols. 3-4).

At 10:00 hours on 30 November, the operations at Abu Musā and Greater Tonb were concluded and the news of it was communicated to Tehran (Rasā’i, col. 4). In the afternoon, Amir-‘Abbās Hoveydā (q.v.), the Iranian prime minister, delivered a speech to the Iranian parliament announcing the return of the islands to the “bosom of the nation” (for the text of the speech see Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Ravābeṭ-e dawlat-e šāhanšāhi bā kešvarhā-ye ḥawze-ye mas’uliyat-e edāra-ye nohom-e siāsi dar panjāh sāl-e šāhanšāhi-ye pahlavi: Emārāt-e ‘Arabi-ye Motaḥḥeda, Baḥrayn, ‘Omān, Qaṭar* (Relations of the Imperial Government with the countries in the area of responsibility of the ninth political bureau during the fifty years of the Pahlavi Empire: United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar), Tehran, 2535 [1976], Annex 4).

Just as it had begun as an imperial consideration of Pax Britannica in 1903-04, the Anglo-Qāsemi hold over the Tonbs came to an end with the British exit from the Persian Gulf. While the Iranian units were landing on Abu Musā and Greater Tonb, on 30 November 1971, the British aircraft



carrier *H.M.S.Eagle* and the cruiser *H.M.S.Albion* were seen standing idle in the Gulf of Oman (Kelly 1980, p. 96). In London, when queried about the proceedings at the islands, the spokesman for the British government stated plainly that Britain could not have been expected “to exercise her treaty responsibilities [toward the Qāsemi shaikhdoms] on the final day” (*The Times*, 1 December 1971, p. 1).

The outrage of the Arab street and the radical Arab governments like South Yemen, Algeria, Iraq, and Libya now threatened to undo the fruits of Iran’s carefully crafted diplomatic offensive in Europe and the Persian Gulf that had regained the islands. The emergency session of the Arab League convened in Cairo on 6-7 December 1971 to consider the United Arab Emirates’ application for membership to that body. The session, considering the Iranian occupation of the islands, met behind closed doors, and it failed to elaborate and carry out a course of action aimed at restoring the Tonbs to Ras al-Khaimah control (Mirfendereski 1985, pp. 64-69). The consideration of the matter by the Security Council of the United Nations on 9 December 1971 produced a resolution by which the matter was taken off the UN agenda in deference to diplomacy and third-party efforts (United Nations Security Council, *Official Records*, 26th year, 1610th meeting, 9 December 1971, pars. 58-283, discussed in Mirfendereski, 1985, pp. 71-75).

Present situation. The “island question,” as the matter is known in the Iranian and Arab capitals, has prevented the United Arab Emirates and Iran from mutually concluding a continental shelf agreement, but does not seem to impede any other aspect of their relations in trade and matters of mutual and expedient benefit. The mistrust between the two sides, however, is endemic and structural, with long historical and cultural roots, and it will not be removed simply by solving the islands issue.

The diplomatic doldrums over the islands was broken suddenly in August 1992 when Iran expelled a number of Arab and other nationals from Abu Musā, stating that their visit there was unauthorized. The ever-present presence of the United States navy in the Gulf since the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and the Gulf War (1991-92) and the general antipathy by the Arab emirates toward Iran and its Islamic republican government, no doubt contributed to Iran’s perception of a threat at the time (Marschall, pp. 100-48). The fear of a United States retaliation for the bombing of the U.S. military housing complex at Kubar Towers in Saudi Arabia led Iran in 1996 to beef up its defenses at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, which included the installation of anti-aircraft guns



and missile-launchers on Tonb (Caldwell; “Iran Found to Build Up Firepower in Persian Gulf,” in *The Boston Globe*, 17 August 1996, p. A13).

The feud over the islands on the part of the United Arab Emirates after 1971 assumed the similar epic dimension which had characterized the Iranian struggle for them in the earlier period against Britain. On various occasions, and mostly in the halls of the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, and in bilateral communiqués with other Arab governments, the United Arab Emirates has called for the return of the islands. The calls for arbitration or adjudication of the ownership of the islands are often ignored by Iran, which prefers to discuss the matter in bilateral negotiations.

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