

**MARITIME POLITICAL
GEOGRAPHY**

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THE PERSIAN GULF ISLANDS OF
TUNBS AND ABU MUSA**

PIROUZ MOJTAHED-ZADEH



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*Maritime Political Geography:
The Persian Gulf Islands of Tunbs and Abu Musa*

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The issue of the Islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa was settled a day after the British withdrew their Pax-Britanica from the region. At the time, I had completed my graduate studies at the University of Tehran with my first book published on the Arab Emirates of the Persian Gulf. By then I was heavily involved in the study of the affairs of that region and after completing my military service in 1972, I proceeded to the West in pursuit of my post graduate studies in political geography of the Persian Gulf at British universities of London, Manchester and Oxford. At the University of Oxford I was fortunate to be accepted for a degree at the level of D.Phil. on the role of Iran in the Persian Gulf, under the supervision of Professor Jean Guttman, internationally respected as the father of modern science of political geography. My new academic position at Oxford together with the publication by Tehran University Press of my second book in 1974 on the historical geography of the Persian Gulf, facilitated my first visit to the entire Arab side of that internationally important waterway, including a visit to Dhufar province of the Sultanate of Oman where Iranian forces were engaged in dislodging a 12- year-old communist separatist movement. This academic progress had also facilitated access to Iranian, Arab and British personalities directly involved in territorial and security arrangements in post-colonial Persian Gulf.

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ators of Iran and Britain respectively, in the issue of negotiated settlement pertaining to the issue of the islands of Tunb and Abu Musa. They provided me with some of the most intimate information relevant to their confidential negotiations on that issue. Hence, I declare that I am most grateful to both personalities and cherish the memory of their generosity in assisting me to prepare a complete and thorough study of the case of these islands.

My first publication in English on the issue of these islands appeared in 1990 in the form of a small volume on the Strait of Hormuz. Professor Jean Gottmann, author of the famous theory of megalopolis in urban geography, had at the time almost concluded his studies of the role and function of urban political geography in our contemporary world of geopolitics of virtual space, and showed interest in the study of geo-strategic role of straits in the changed geopolitical world of early twenty first century. He showed particular interest in expanding his new academic venture on the basis of my book on the Strait of Hormuz and territorial arrangements therein, but sadly life did not hesitate in bringing his brilliant academic carrier to an end in 1994. I pay my humblest homage to his memory and his works, as well as to all he had done to assist me in my studies of political geography of the Persian Gulf.

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Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh
London – Summer 2014

**AUTHOR MEETING TOP POLITICAL AUTHORITIES
IN IRAN AND ARAB EMIRATES AFFECTING
THE 1970 MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING
ON THE ISLANDS**

Author meets in early 1970s; the Rulers of Arab Emirates of the region: His Highness Sheikh Rashed Bin Saeed Al-Maktum, the then ruler of Dubai (1); His Highness Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Qasemi, the then ruler of Sharjah (2), and His Highness Sheikh Saqar Bin Mohammad Al-Qasemi, ruler of Ras al-Kheimah to this date (3). These meetings took place in March 1971, a few months before the islands of Tunb and Abu Musa were returned to Iran. The latter three rulers were at the time, the most relevant personalities in the Arab world in connection with the issue of Abu Musa and Tunb islands.

i. - Author meets Sheikh Rashed bin Saeed Al-Maktum of Dubai



ii. - Author meets Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Qasemi of Sharjah



iii. - Author meets Sheikh Saqar bin Mohammad Al-Qasemi of Ras al-Kheimah



GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Whither Maritime Political Geography: With Reference to Geopolitics of Boundaries and Territoriality in the Persian Gulf

Maritime political geography is about the study of implementation of state sovereignty at sea, or; it is the art of determining extension of sovereignty exercise of a state in the maritime areas surrounding its territories.

The control and ownership of the maritime areas adjacent to state territories and their seaward extensions have for a long period of time been a controversial topic. Since ancient empires began to sail and trade over the seas, command of coastal areas has been important to governments. However, it wasn't until the twentieth century that countries began to come together to discuss a standardization of maritime boundaries. Surprisingly, the situation still has yet to be resolved.

Before the 1950s, countries established the limits of their jurisdiction at sea at will. While a sea power like Britain Empire established a distance of 3 nautical miles to make it guarantee its access to the 3 miles of the coast lines of other countries, others gradually established the their territorial waters at 12 nm, which was internationally adopted later on. These *territorial waters* are considered part of a country's jurisdiction, subject to all of the laws of the land of that country.

In 1945, U.S. President Harry Truman claimed the entire continental shelf off the coast of the U.S. (which extends almost 200 nm off the Atlantic coast). In 1952, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador claimed a zone 200 nm from their shores.

The need for standardization of the maritime areas at sea was first realized by the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS I) in 1958. In 1960 UNCLOS II was held and in 1973 UNCLOS III took place. Following UNCLOS III, a treaty was developed that attempted to tackle the boundary issue. It specified that all coastal countries would have a 12 nm territorial sea and a 200 nm Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Each country would control the economic exploitation and environmental quality of their EEZ.

Though the treaty has yet to be ratified, most countries are adhering to its guidelines and begun to consider themselves as rulers over a 200 nm domain (iii).

A more recent study on environmental impact on maritime political geography suggests that rising sea levels in the wake of climate change has the potential to undermine existing legal regimes that govern control of the world's oceans and continental shelves. Climate-driven environmental changes are already destabilizing the Arctic and fostering new types of alliances. By altering commonly accepted baselines that are used to determine the right of states to extend state control outward from their shores, they also have the potential to undermine fragile accords in the maritime arena, and to create new sources of instability. From a policy perspective, recognizing that rising sea levels will likely undermine existing maritime regimes points to the need for proactive agreements that anticipate changes in the configuration of coastlines. Conceptually, the potential for environmental change to alter jurisdictional arrangements highlights the importance of challenging the long-standing tendency to treat the environment as a constant in geopolitical analyses (iv).

Maritime political geography of the Persian Gulf

Iran had announced on 15 July 1934 her territorial waters in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman to be six miles from the low-water marks of her coastline. On March 19, 1949 Iran announced her rights of continental shelf oil exploration. Thereafter the littoral Arab states of the lower Gulf followed the example and each issued a similar declaration; Saudi Arabia on May 29, 1949; Qatar on June 8, 1949; Abu Dhabi on June 10, 1949; Kuwait on June 12, 1949; Dubai on June 14, 1949; Sharjah on June 16, 1949; and Umm al-Quwain and Ajman on June 20, 1949 (v).

On May 18, 1955 Iran claimed the seabed resources of her continental shelf in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. On April 22, 1959 Iran changed the limits of her territorial sea from six to 12 nautical miles in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman) and later claimed an area adjacent to her territorial sea, as her contiguous zone, the outer limit of which is 24 nautical miles from the baseline.

Maritime Controversies in the Persian Gulf

Pax-Britannica was withdrawn from the Persian Gulf in 1971 and the Americans entered the region in 1981. The interim period was the period of Iranian domination of affairs in the region and it was during this period that territorial and boundary disputes began to put on display their series impact on the development of peace and stability in the absence of outside powers.

Yet, immediately after the British withdrew forces from the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971, Iran began the initiative of settling territorial differences among the littoral state. Negotiations for the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Persian Gulf which started in 1968 with Saudi Arabia continued with each and every Arab states of the region and by mid-1970s all maritime boundaries of Iran with her Arab neighbours were settled. In 1975 the age-old Iran-Iraq territorial and boundary disputes were settled in Shatt al Arab, and in the same year Iran's initiative of settling territorial disputes went beyond the region of the Persian Gulf and the Shah quelled the fire separatist movements in Dhufar of Oman as well as intervening in Egyptian Israeli disputes and settle their differences over the Sinai Peninsula. Israeli author, Samuel Segev admits in his 1981 publications on Israeli secret relations in the Middle East that "*The Shah was the originator of the idea to mediate between Anwar Sadat and Golda Meir*" (vi).

Iran had already started supply of oil to Israel and after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war when Egypt last control of Sinai Peninsula to Israel, Iran began mediating between the belligerents to save the situation in favour of Egypt. This is confirmed by the sources from both sides and this is the reason that Sadat remained a faithful friend of the Shah until the very end of his life and risked his own carrier and life in the pursuit of that faithful friendship.

In 1975 Iran sought to use her oil supplies to Israel as leverage in an attempt to induce Israel to relinquish her control over the Egyptian oilfields in the occupied Sinai Peninsula and return Sinai to Egypt in return for Egypt's official recognition of Israel as well as the Shah pledging to provide Israel with the amount of oil Israel needed after relinquishing Sinai Peninsula to Egypt (vii).

Another instance of Iranian endeavour to safeguard Arab territorial integrity was Iran's undertaking in eradication of threats to Oman's territorial integrity in early 1970s. Within three years Iranian soldiers defended with their lives Oman's territorial integrity in

Dhufar Province in the face of a fierce communist separatist movement that British forces could not eradicate in twelve years (viii).

Iran – UAE Territorial contentions

As the Government of Great Britain announced in January 1968 the decision of withdrawing Pax-Britannica from the Gulf, the states in the region developed a sense of urgency for closer cooperation that would enable them to fill the gap potentially emerging in the wake of the British withdrawal. To this end, settlement of outstanding territorial and boundary differences became a necessity, especially in the off-shore areas of the region where exploration and exploitation of new oilfields were expanding rapidly (ix).

This expansion in off-shore oil exploitation underlined the urgency of defining various states' boundaries before the matter developed into issues of conflict. Iran had in 1965 started negotiations with the British for off-shore boundaries settlement in the Gulf, but successful negotiations had to wait until late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Anglo-Iranian negotiations, however, established the median line of the Persian Gulf as a principle upon which the continental shelf between Iran and her Arab neighbours was to be divided in that sea. It was on the basis of this principle that the subsequent continental shelf delimitation agreements in the Persian Gulf were achieved (x).

On 11 February 1966 Mr. Mohammad Reza Amir-Teimur of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sir Roger Allen of British Foreign Office initialed an agreed minute in which Iran on the one side, and Great Britain on behalf of its protectorate Arab states on the Persian Gulf, on the other, reaffirmed the principle of median line of the Persian Gulf as the basis for dividing the continental shelf of that sea, and divided the Iran-Qatar continental shelf.

With an area of 155,000 square kilometers and an average depth of about 50 meters, the whole of the Gulf is an extended continental shelf, and its geographical shape - a curved rectangle - puts Iranian territories on the one hand, and territories of most Arab states of the lower Gulf on the other, on opposite sides of each other. Such a geographical situation necessitates the consideration of a median line down the Gulf. But the problem was that different states claimed different base lines. The location of different islands - claimed by some government to be the base line - added further complication to the matter. Solving these whole areas of disagreements needed real

cooperation and understanding which was, at the time, elevated by the announcement of the said British decision.

Iran and the Arab states of the region have claimed exclusive fisheries zones of their own and continental shelf claims extended to continental shelf boundaries to be established at the equidistant lines. In the Gulf of Oman Iran has claimed an exclusive fisheries zone extending to the equidistant line with the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

Anticipating future discovery of oil or gas structures across boundaries in the maritime areas of the Persian Gulf, Iran decided to enforce a provision in her continental shelf agreements with the states on the opposite side to prevent inappropriate exploitation of such structures.

According to this provision, appearing in all Iran's continental shelf boundary agreements in the region, if a petroleum structure extends across the boundary and could be exploited from the other side of the boundary, then (a) there shall be no sub-surface well completion within 125 metres of the boundary (500 metres in the case of maritime boundary with Saudi Arabia) without the mutual agreement of the two parties; and (b) the two parties shall attempt to agree on coordination or unitisation of operations with respect to such structures.

CHAPTER 1

Geographical Description of the Persian Gulf Islands at the Strait of Hormuz

The three islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa are situated somewhere near the entrance of the Persian Gulf. They are considered in Iranian strategic view of the region as forming parts of an imaginary curved line covering the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow and curved channel, connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. It is approximately 100 nautical miles long and about 27 nautical miles wide¹. This strait disrupts continuation of Iran's southern mountain range into the Musandam Peninsula. Thus, the Strait of Hormuz is a geological depression bounded by Iran to the north and the Musandam Peninsula – divided between Oman and the United Arab Emirates – to the south. The narrowest part of the Strait – 21 nautical miles – lies between the Iranian island of Larak and the Omani islet of Greater Quoin.

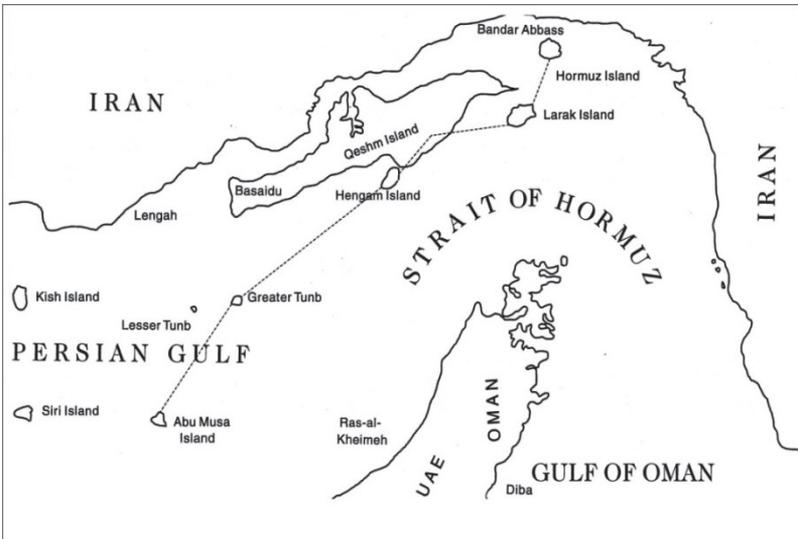


Figure 1: Iran's imaginary curved line of strategic defence connecting her strategic islands at the Strait of Hormuz.

Both Iran and Oman claim 12 miles of territorial waters there, which overlap by a stretch of 15 miles along the curved median line of the Strait. Here the two states have agreed in 1975 to define a median line in the middle of the overlapped area.

Shipping in the Strait of Hormuz took the shortest route between the Little Quoin and the Musandam Peninsula until 1979 when Oman demanded that shipping in the Strait of Hormuz should take the lanes beyond the northern side of Quoin Islands. This was to lessen the difficulties of ensuring safe passage of ships so close to the rocky coasts of these islands and those at the tip of the Musandam Peninsula. The new shipping lanes, generally used since 1979, are two: a northern lane for entering the Persian Gulf, and the southern lane for fully laden heavy tankers leaving for the open seas. They are about one mile wide each and they are separated by a safety zone which is also about one mile wide. The new shipping lanes are also designed within Oman's territorial waters. This means that Oman takes official responsibility for the safety of shipping through these lanes. Shipping in the Strait of Hormuz is, however, not restricted to these particular channels. Although the Strait's depth decreases towards Iranian shores, there are still enough deep water channels for larger tankers to approach within a few miles of the Iranian coasts².

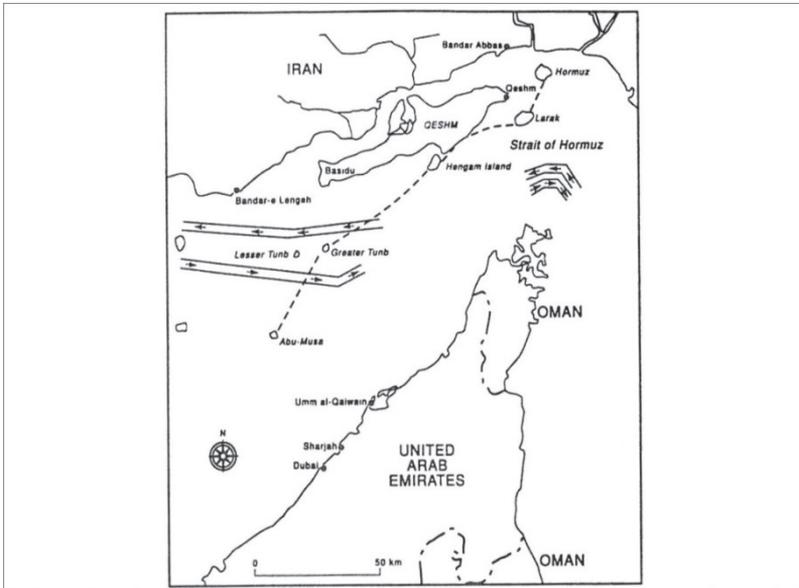


Figure 2: *Shipping lanes to and from the Strait of Hormuz*

For the protection of the Strait of Hormuz against any foreign threats in the wake of British withdrawal of forces from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Iran found herself to be better placed than any other country of the region. From the Iranian point of view, this was largely because, apart from possessing the strongest military of the region, the Strait could be better protected from the strategically-situate ports alongside the waterway and Iranian islands located favourably in the Strait of Hormuz and across the approaches to it. Moreover, Iran signed in 1975 a security arrangement with Oman whereby she is given free access to maintain security throughout all parts of the Strait. Ironically, when threatened by the European Union in 2012 of cutting off export of oil to the member states of the union, Iranian authorities considered the threat as declaration of war on Iran as oil exports are her lifeline. They in return declared that in the event of such declaration they will endeavour to disrupt oil shipments from all belligerent nations through the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran possesses a number of strategic islands at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, of which six islands of the so-called 'curved line' are of greatest significance. These are the islands of Hormuz, Larak, Qeshm, Hengam, greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. As a top ranking officer of Iran's former supreme commander's staff under the Shah told this author in 1978, Iran's perceived strategy then was to utilise these islands' strategic value by maintaining a degree of defensive force there.

An imaginary line (the curved line) drawn alongside these islands, which are situated within relatively short distances of one another (see figure 1), makes it easy to appreciate how effectively the shipping lanes of the Strait of Hormuz would be covered by an Iranian defence power stationed on these islands, he said³. Perhaps a relatively detailed study of the geographical situation of the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa in this strategic curved line of Iranian defence at the entrance of the Persian Gulf would allow us better appreciation of Iran's sensitivity towards any claim of ownership of these islands from the region or beyond: