

# British Colonial Policy and the Persian Gulf Islands

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## **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the visit of the Iranian President to the Island of Abu Musa on 11 April 2012 and the uproar that followed, a fresh look at the issue is warranted. The concern of this paper is not to discuss the three Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, but to briefly review the context which gave rise to the issue of the three islands in the first place and influenced its development to date. The paper tries to place the current controversy surrounding the three islands in its historic perspective, explaining how it grew out of antagonism that marked the relationship between the prevailing global power, Great Britain, and the major regional power, Iran, for 170 years. It aims to address the general policy of Britain during its presence in the Persian Gulf, which aimed in part to control all islands of this waterway. It explains how for 170 years, Britain tried to erode Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf, both directly by asserting its colonial rule over Iranian islands and port districts, and indirectly by claiming Iranian islands for its protégés on the Arab littoral. It shows that this tactic applied to almost all other Iranian islands in one way or another and was not limited to the three islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs.

**Keywords:** Persian Gulf, islands, British control, Islands of Abu Musa and Tunbs, Hengam, Qeshm, Bahrain, Kharg

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### Introduction

The issue of the three Islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb is among many disputes that once pitted Iran and Britain against each other in the Persian Gulf and survived the British withdrawal from the region in 1971. It figures notably among the consequences of Britain's colonial past in the Persian Gulf; thus, understanding its nature and development requires that it be put into the context of the tumultuous Anglo-Iranian relationship since the early nineteenth century. As the Persian Gulf remains a strategic vortex of international politics, it is important that its problems be well understood. As today's problems can be only understood in the light of past developments, the need to revisit and discuss the issues that are of importance to the riparian states, and thus to the entire world, can never be exhausted.

Britain, as a global maritime power, attached great importance to the Persian Gulf's islands in its quest to control the area as a defensive outpost with which to secure the approaches to the crown jewel of its empire; the Indian subcontinent. Treaty arrangements regulated Britain's relationships with and dominance over the Arab sheikhs on the lower coast during the informal protectorate regime of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But, British access to and control of the Iranian islands, especially those lining the north shores of the Persian Gulf or dominating the sea lanes through the Strait of Hormuz, were a *sine qua non* for strengthening this protectorate regime, supporting the British flotilla and at the same time keeping European rivals out of those waters.



Moreover, believing that India's front line of defense lay in Persia and the Persian Gulf, the intensification of Russian influence over the Qajar court, in the context of a Russian push from the north, was another threat perceived by the British. The Russians annexed Iranian territory in the Caucasus in the 1810s and 1820s, and the Russian-officered Cossack Brigade established in Tehran further alarmed the British. They feared a breakthrough in favour of the Russians, enabling them to get to the shores of the Persian Gulf as a first stop on their way towards India. The control of Iranian possessions in the Persian Gulf was, therefore, sought by the British as a way, among other things, to dispel the danger of European rivals turning the islands into bridgeheads for the expansion of their presence in the area and undermining their Indian defense. Beginning with John Malcolm, the British envoy in the early eighteenth century, British officials believed that "the establishment of a Russian ascendancy at Tehran would have an unsettling effect upon British rule in India" (Kelly, 1968: 262).

At several points during the 1838–42 occupation of the island of Kharg, British officials even discussed among themselves the retention of the island or adjacent city of Bushehr or both "as being strategically and commercially desirable" (Kelly, 1968: 293). Consequently, the British adopted a policy that leaned towards containing and weakening Iran in the Persian Gulf and along its eastern land borders and chipping away at its control in those areas. A dispatch from the British Government of India, written in 1870 and entirely approved by the Duke of Argyll, Secretary of State for India, reflects the general course of policy the British maintained throughout their colonial presence in the Persian Gulf. This document states that "the present is not when we can encourage the revival of old and unfounded claims such as those which Persia now puts forward." It continues:

*"Even if the political engagements which we have contracted admitted of such a course, and Persia were possessed of an adequate naval force, it would be*



*almost impossible and certainly impolitic to commit to her the guardianship of these vast and varied interests.” (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: 107).*

While prohibiting the Trucial states as well as Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait from parting with any portion of their territory in favour of any power without British authorization under the “Exclusive Treaty”, Britain sought incessantly to bring maritime territory under its direct or indirect control. Consequently, the Persian Gulf islands, which were and continue to be, to some extent, exceptionally important in terms of their international status, strategic location and economic relevance, were deeply involved in successive imperial intrigues and played a very influential role in Anglo-Iranian relations.

To achieve its goals in the Persian Gulf, Britain applied its established colonial policy of cultivating notables in charge of small political entities, as opposed to engaging regional powers, since smaller entities were much more amenable to adaptation to British wishes. It is said of Lord Curzon that his ideal was “the creation of a chain of vassal states stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs” (Landen, 1967: 250). This well describes British dealings with those found on the margins of their colonies and within independent states, including the Trucial Arab units.

As a result, an unrelenting struggle began in 1820s and continued throughout the British presence for more than 150 years, with the control of these Iranian islands at stake. In the course of this long-lasting struggle between the pre-eminent global power and the major regional power,<sup>1</sup> numerous individual disputes broke out, and almost every Iranian island in the Persian Gulf was the subject of dispute during one period or another. Although in the cases of most islands – including Qeshm, Hengam, Hormuz, Larak, Kharg and Sirri – the British, after exhausting all avenues, gave up and grudgingly acknowledged Iranian sovereignty, they did not abandon efforts to establish or maintain their *de facto* control over the islands in one way or another.



### **I- A British Base on an Iranian Island (Qeshm)**

With their increasing presence in the Persian Gulf, the British soon found themselves in growing need of access and docking facilities for their heavy and powerful flotilla. The idea of a base in the Persian Gulf to protect commercial interests had been broached in the eighteenth century, but the scheme advanced in the nineteenth century, derived mainly from political and strategic considerations. A military presence on, for example, the Iranian islands of Kharg or Qeshm, it was argued, would not only offer protection against pirates but also serve to counter Persian and French designs in the area (Peterson, 2002: 14).

The islands of Qeshm, Hengam and Kharg were the first Iranian possessions in the Persian Gulf on which the British set their sights. This came about following the massive and bloody suppression of the Qawassim pirates in 1819-20 and after the general agreement in Bombay on future policy in the Persian Gulf and the need for a permanent British base to prevent a resurgence of piracy. Such a base, it was considered, should preferably be located on an island commanding the Strait of Hormuz (Kelly, 1968: 167). Earlier, British designs on the control of Iranian possessions in the Persian Gulf had first come to light when Sir John Malcolm, the British envoy in 1800–01, tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Shah of Iran to cede or lease either Qeshm or Hengam (Kelly, 1968: 167). As Lord Curzon recorded, “the land-locked bay between Henjam and Qishm was recommended by Sir J. Malcolm in 1800, as [a] naval station, having an easy entrance and excellent anchorage. But it was never occupied” (Curzon, 1966: 413).

Later, in 1808, Malcolm switched his attention to Kharg and advocated its acquisition by force, if necessary. A year later, the commanders of the first expedition against the Qawassim, who had been instructed to report on the suitability of Qeshm and other islands near the entrance to the Persian Gulf as sites for a base,



reported in favour of Hengam Island (Kelly, 1968: 167). During Malcolm's negotiations with the Persian court in Tehran, he requested the concession of Qeshm, Hengam, and Kharg islands. After the change in the French policy with regard to Persia and the collapse of the Perso-French agreement, Sir Harford Jones, British Minister, arrived in Tehran in 1809 as the British ambassador and pursued negotiations with Iranian officials and asked for the concession of a number of islands and port facilities in the Persian Gulf (Tadjbakhche, 1960: 56).

The issue of establishing a British base on an Iranian island became dormant for more than a decade following the Iranian authorities' refusal to go along with the British offer on their maritime territories and internal British disagreement among themselves on the wisdom of establishing a permanent base in the Persian Gulf. After the second expedition against the Qawassim, on the piratical coast, in 1819, the idea of a base was revived. At this point, British forces occupied Qeshm Island in order to remain in a position to control the lower Persian Gulf, and British officials approached the Imam of Muscat to sanction the occupation of the island, thus recognizing him as the authority owning the island. The British did this despite the fact that they had, earlier in the 1800s, approached the Iranian court to request cession of the same island to Britain, thus recognizing Iranian sovereignty over it.

The Government of Bombay, in a communication dated 28 October 1819, addressed to Sir William Keir, the British Commander in the Persian Gulf, sought his opinion on a number of issues. The document reads in part:

*“As a measure the most effectually conducive to the permanent suppression of piracy on the Persian Gulf, the occupation by the British Government of a central and commanding situation appears to be indispensable; nor is the Governor in Council aware of a more eligible station than the island of Kishm for that purpose, upon which, however, your opinion is desired.”*

*“It is understood that the Island of Qeshm, as well as Angar [Hengam]...*



*belongs in full sovereignty to Sayyid Sa'id, the Imam of Maskat, and should the reports that may be received from you and the other persons to whom the consideration of this important subject has been confided be favourable to the measure now suggested, the necessary negotiation will be opened for obtaining possession of the spot that may be fixed upon for forming the establishment"* (Schofield, 1990: 523-4).

Sir William Keir, in his reply dated 1 April 1820, states:

*"I have already most strongly recommended that the eventual removal [of British troops from Ras al-Khaimah] should be to the Island of Kishm, all that I have learnt since offering that recommendation, has tended to confirm my opinion of that island being the most favourable situation in every respect"* (Schofield, 1990: 526). Despite the fact that Sir John Malcolm had earlier requested the concession on Qeshm from the Persian court, thus recognizing Persian sovereignty over the island, this time the British approached the Imam of Muscat, and in May 1820 requested his consent to the use of the same island. This was an important development because it marked the first time that the British attempted to gain control of a Persian possession in the Gulf by claiming it for a ruler in the Arab littoral. Captain Thomson, commander of the British troops in Ras al-Khaimah, reported to Bombay on 29 May 1820 that he had received "the full consent of the Imam" in writing (Hawley, 1970: 102-5).

At the same time, Sir Henry Willock, the British *chargé d'affaires* in Tehran, approached the court to secure Persian consent to the British presence on Qeshm too, and warned the Persian government of the consequences should it refuse. In the event, the takeover of the island of Qeshm by the British set in motion a series of bitter Persian protests, which resulted in Britain disengaging from the island at a later date. Willock reported in a dispatch dated 10 May 1820 that: "The Persian Government were not very pleased with the British proceedings in the Persian Gulf and by no means welcomed the idea of the British occupation of Kishm or any other island on the Gulf. As Lorimer put it,

*"The occupation of Qishm provoked, as seems to have been foreseen, extreme*



*resentment on the part of the Persian Government, who absolutely denied the title of the Sultan of Oman to independent sovereignty over Qishm ... No argument which the British representative in Tehran could adduce had any effect on the mind of the Shah or his ministers; and they continued to demand, as they had done from the outset, the withdrawal of the British detachment” (Lormier, 1986: 200).*

The Persian government presented to the British *chargé d'affaires* a *note verbale*, dated 9 December 1820, strongly remonstrating against the British proceedings, noting in part that:

*“His Majesty’s Chargé d’affaires likewise stated ... that the Imam of Maskat (who on [sic] that part of Persia is the Governor of Bander Abbas and its dependencies) was willing to allow of a British Settlement on the Island of Kishm or Henjam; to this was answered, that first Maskat is a dependency of Persia, and as the Imam has not the power of permitting the residence of British troops at Maskat, much less can he grant a permission at Kishm and Henjam which are dependencies of Bandar Abbas.”*

The same note goes on to question the wisdom of stationing a British detachment in the Persian Gulf, “now that the Joasmis are subdued” and suggests that:

*“The Prince of Fars will use his utmost endeavours in preserving the security of the Persian Gulf, and if ships of war are necessary for that purpose, orders will be given for their outfit. We do not know on what account the troops from India have settled in the Persian Gulf. In short, orders will be issued to . . . the Prince of Fars to send a person to the troops on Kishm desiring them immediately to leave it and we now request His Majesty’s Chargé d’affaires to direct the officer commanding at Kishm to return to India with his troops and . . . in future to avoid such acts which are contrary to the spirit of the Treaty between our two States” (Schofield, 1990: 530).*

From the minute recorded by Sir Monstuart Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay, on the Iranian note, the following is of interest:

*The King of Persia’s alarm at our occupation of Kishm appears, however, to be serious and unfeigning and on this ground the Honourable the Governor*





*would be disposed to give up the measure if it were not one of urgent necessity... It is believed also that the British Government has in some measure countenanced the claim of the King of Persia to Kishm by requesting from His Majesty in the year of 1799 the cession of that island (Schofield, 1990: 530).*

British correspondence even reveals that at the time, the British considered it probable that the Prince of Fars would attack British troops on Qeshm, and directed their representative “to point out the power the British Government possesses of avenging on Persia any unprovoked attack which may be made on our troops in the Gulf.”<sup>22</sup> A letter from the Government of Bombay to the Government of India indicates that the British, while under intense pressure by Tehran to withdraw from Qeshm, were entertaining the idea of recommending to the Imam of Muscat that he retain his claim to Qeshm, as this island “was probably beyond the reach of [the Persian] Monarch’s power.”<sup>23</sup>

It was not long, however, before there were new problems with the Persians. Other difficulties on the ground, including inclement weather and diseases, coupled with the reassessment of the real need for a base, led to a discussion in British circles on the wisdom of maintaining a permanent base in the region. As a result, they decided to set aside the idea of establishing a base in favour of relying on a patrolling cruiser squadron, that is, a “scheme of maritime control” (Hawley, 1970: 164), and on contractual arrangements with the sheikhs. As Lorimer points out, eventually the British authorities in India arrived at the conclusion that it would be better to evacuate the island than to be constantly at issue with Persia in regard to it.

Consequently, on 20 November 1822 the British Senior Officer in the Persian Gulf received instructions “to bring down the garrison and the whole of the British establishment from the Island of Kishm to Bombay ... [I]t has been expedient to make the port of Muscat the general rendezvous for the Honourable Company’s cruisers accordingly” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. I. 693). After the British evacuated Qeshm in 1823, they established a coaling depôt at Basidu, located at



the northwestern extremity of the island. Lord Curzon maintained that Kishm was a British military or naval station during a part of the nineteenth century. A cantonment of English and Indian troops, several hundred strong, was established in 1820 to overawe the Qawassims. After being displaced on the island several times because of an inclement climate, the troops finally settled down at Basidu. In Curzon's view, the danger of malarial fever and the diminution of need for their services in the area led to their withdrawal three years later (Curzon, 1966: Vol. II. 412).

Although rumours circulated for close to a century that Fat'h Ali Shah issued a *firman* (royal decree) formally ceding Basidu to the British, and some authors surmised that this might have happened through a covert accord between the Persian government and the British in 1822 (Mehr, 1997: 109), it became clear in the 1920s that this had not been the case. Declassified Iranian documents dating from 1925 to 1935 clarify that no document to this effect ever existed. Following the rise of Reza Shah, as Britain and Iran engaged in intense negotiations with a view to the settlement of numerous outstanding issues, the Iranian side thoroughly searched various national and local archives, looking for any document that might substantiate any possible acquisition of British rights to Basidu. Failing to find one, the Iranian Foreign Ministry recommended approaching the British and asking them to submit documents that they might hold that would "clarify the extent of their concession" in Basidu, and, should no such documents be forthcoming, "formally requesting them to evacuate the place."<sup>4</sup> The Iranian government acted on this recommendation, but to no avail. In respect to this issue, Iran's Foreign Minister Bagher Kazimi, in his letter No. 19803 dated 12 Aban 1312 (3 October 1933) to the British chargé d'affaires in Tehran, stated that, as "any claim should be based on evidence, unfortunately, despite the fact that the Imperial Foreign Ministry has requested on numerous occasions leading to the latest one, dated 10 Khordad 1305 (31 May 1927), that the HMG of Britain present its



evidence substantiating its claims to Basidu, no answer has so far been given to the Imperial Government” (Institute for International and Political Studies (IIPS), 1989: 426).

Differences between the two countries finally led to letter No. 37321, dated 13 Day 1312 (3 January 1934), from Kazimi to the British chargé d'affaires in Tehran, in which he confidently stated that “the Iranian Government has never recognized any right whatsoever for the British at Basidu and will never do in the future” (Institute for International and Political Studies (IIPS), 1989: 488).

The British failure in securing control over Qeshm, which was the first British attempt to claim an Iranian island for an Arab *protégé* of theirs or induce such a *protégé* to advance such a claim, helped move them towards adopting the policy of cultivating relationships with tribal Arab sheikhs through binding contractual arrangements and containing Iran to their advantage. Likewise, the unsuccessful British efforts in the 1800s and 1810s to induce the Persian government to allow them access to Persia’s possessions in the Persian Gulf was also important, as it led London and Bombay to adopt the policy of strengthening individual rulers on the Arab littoral and along common eastern borders at the expense of Persia. This new policy was pursued vigorously in the case of Bahrain.

## II- Claiming Bahrain for an Arab Littoral Sheikh

The British policy of pushing the Iranian government off of the island of Bahrain, initiated in 1817–20, was another case in point where the British attempted rather successfully this time to divest Iran of its possessions in favour of the Arab sheikhs under their protection. In this period, the sheikhs of Bahrain (Sheikh Abdullah and Sheikh Salman), while reaffirming their submission to the Persian court and declaring loyalty to the provincial government of Fars, refrained from regularly sending the due tributes to the Fars Treasury. It is believed that advice by Lieutenant Bruce, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, encouraged the sheikhs in this decision. Iranian title to Bahrain



was not in dispute at the time. It rested on Iranian sovereignty over the island for several centuries and at least since 1622 when the sheikh of Bahrain acknowledged himself a vassal of Persia, and on the fact that a substantial proportion of its inhabitants were Shia Muslims of Iranian descent or were immigrants from the Persian side of the Persian Gulf. As the authoritative scholar J. B. Kelly recognizes, at the beginning, the Al-Khalifa ruling family did not deny Persian title to the island and they paid an annual tribute to Shiraz (Kelly, 1968: 30).

In the confidential “Memorandum on the Separate Claims of Turkey and Persia to Sovereignty over the Island of Bahrain”, dated 25 March 1874 and written by E. Hertslet, a Foreign Office official, it is stated that “Bahrein was occupied by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, but in 1622 they were expelled by the Persians, who appeared to have held possession of the island till about the year 1782 or 1783.” A footnote to this statement reads: “the “Imperial Gazetteer” states that the Persians withdrew from the island in 1790” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. I. 343). According to the same report, Willock, the British Minister in Tehran, reported on 6 April 1817 that an agent of the Sheikh of Bahrain was in Tehran, and that a letter - of which he was the bearer - stated that “as the inhabitants of the island were of the same sect as the natives of Persia, they had always looked up to the Persian Monarch as their protector and head, they therefore hoped for His Majesty’s assistance to cloak them from the oppression of the Wahabees.” Winlock’s later report indicates that “a *firman* was in consequence issued by the Shah to the Imaum of Muscat, granting the military assistance he solicited” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. I. 343).

While recognizing at this time Iranian sovereignty over Bahrain, the British maintained that any act of coercion could be dangerous for the general peace in the Persian Gulf and for commercial British interests. The Governor of Bombay, in a dispatch of 15 December 1819 addressed to the British chargé d’affaires in Tehran, wrote:

“We intend to avoid any intervention in the affairs of Bahrain; there is all reason to think that the Sheikhs of Bahrain will accept to



pay tribute to the Persian government, if it consents to leave them enjoy [autonomy]. With this objective, the mediation by the British would be readily offered.”<sup>5</sup>

Under the above instruction, Willock wrote to the Persian government that “according to the arrangement, the Sheikh of Bahrain will pay the tribute to Persia, and the Shah will refrain from intervening in Bahrain’s domestic affairs” (Tadjbakhche, 1960: 58-9). In the Treaty of Shiraz, concluded in 1822 between Captain Bruce, the British Political Resident, and the Governor of Shiraz, the British officially and clearly recognized “the title of Persia to possession of Bahrain.”<sup>6</sup> The British Government of India opposed the treaty for different reasons, including the recognition of Iranian sovereignty over Bahrain and considered it to be “in contradiction of the pretensions of our friends, the Imam of Muscat, as well as the independence of the Utubis who are linked with us by a treaty of friendship.”<sup>7</sup>

Failing to strike a deal with the Shah on Persian islands and before opting to encourage the Sheikhs of Bahrain to claim independence from Iran, the British toyed for a while with the idea of placing the lower shores of the Persian Gulf under the authority of Sayyid Sa’id and investing him with possession of Bahrain and requiring him to contribute to the cost of a British military base (Kelly, 1968: 145-6). Finally, the British officials concluded that Sayyid Sa’id was weak and restless, and wholly unsuitable as a chief to whom a sort of general supremacy in the Persian Gulf could be given. This conclusion turned out to be important as far as the future of Bahrain was concerned. The British later let it be understood that the accession of the Al Khalifah to the General Treaty of Peace in February 1820 (Kelly, 1968: 165) implied the recognition by their government of the independent status of Bahrain and that the Al Khalifah should be assured that the British government had no intention of helping the Persians to subdue them, and that the Shah, for his part, should be told that any move by him to enforce his claim



to the island that disturbed the peace of the Persian Gulf and disrupted trade would be viewed with regret in India (Kelly, 1968: 165-6).

A Foreign Office memorandum, dated February 1908, stated that up to the year 1907, “His Majesty’s Government have repudiated the Persian claim to sovereignty over Bahrain nine times – 1822, 1825, 1844, 1848, 1861, 1862, 1869, 1906 and 1907” (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV. 37).<sup>8</sup> Having secured their control over Bahrain through a friendly Arab chief, the British focused, in the latter part of the nineteenth century and in conjunction with the assertive Curzon strategy, on the Persian islands lining the north shores of the Strait of Hormuz – mainly Qeshm and Hengam – and those immediately outside the Strait – namely, Sirri, Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb.

### III- The Occupation of the Kharg Island

In 1837, despite the British opposition, Iranian forces surrounded the city of Herat in present-day Afghanistan, which used to be part of Iranian territory. Reacting harshly to this move, the British sent reinforcements from the Persian Gulf to reverse early Iranian gains. Moreover, after a final warning to the Shah that Britain would not tolerate the siege of Herat any longer, the expeditionary force from Bombay dropped anchor close to Bushehr in June 1838 and troops were put ashore on Kharg Island, a move that combined with other pressures on the Shah led him to abandon the siege and retreat to the west (Kelly, 1968: 296-99). Despite the ending of the siege, the British refused to evacuate Kharg. They contemplated several options, including permanent occupation, proposing to buy it from the Shah, and returning it to nominal Iranian sovereignty but keeping effective control (Kelly, 1968: 347-8).

In 1841, for instance, the British Resident proposed that the island should be purchased from Persia with a view to relocating the Residency there instead of at Bushehr, and a permanent settlement



and coal depôt established. London considered this proposal carefully, but in the end decided that to acquire Kharg by purchase would give Russia an opportunity of obtaining the cession of part of Gilan (Lormier, 1986: Vol. I, Part II, 1993). Under pressure from Tehran and Moscow, the British finally withdrew their forces from Kharg in March 1842, more than four years after the Iranian retreat from Herat (Lormier, 1986: Vol. I, Part II, 349). As a result of the crisis of 1837–42 and the coercion employed against Iran, Anglo-Persian relations never resumed an even course. The experience affected the bilateral relationship in a deep and far-reaching way until the withdrawal of the British from the Persian Gulf in 1971.

In 1852, following another effort by Nasir al-Din Shah of Iran to conquer Herat, the British intervened and forced Iran to retreat. During another clash over Herat in 1856, the Shah's troops finally entered the city. The British reaction was harsh and disproportionate. They disembarked forces on Kharg and in Bushehr and engaged Persian troops. Another British force comprising close to 5,000 men sailed from Bushehr and attacked the Province of Khuzestan. They also threatened to advance towards Shiraz from Bushehr. The Iranians finally engaged in negotiations with the British in Paris, where they eventually accepted the British terms and signed the Treaty of Paris in April 1857. As a result, Iran evacuated Herat and renounced all pretensions to the city.<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence of this full-scale war, Persian suspicions of British intentions ran deeper, and the eventual fate of Herat only turned the Persians' distrust to bitterness. A fear of piecemeal annexation, on the pattern of the British conquest of India, haunted the minds of Iranians throughout the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries. The same fear had been responsible for the repeated refusal, ever since John Malcolm first broached the subject in 1801, to cede or lease an island off the Persian coast to the British government.



#### IV- Unsuccessful Attempts to Control Qeshm

Perceived threatening activities on the part of the Russians and other powers in the Persian Gulf at the turn of nineteenth century, coupled with the new Iranian assertiveness, led the British to try to strengthen their position on the islands lining the north shores of the Strait of Hormuz. It also led the British to develop contingencies should Russia or others unexpectedly seize a naval station in the area. These efforts included the quest for a suitable island on which to establish a naval base.

There is much evidence of Britain's quest to strengthen its position at the entrance of the Persian Gulf prior to its claiming the three islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs for the Trucial chiefs. A Foreign Office memorandum of 12 February 1908 states that "[t]he importance of Bunder Abbas, with the adjacent Islands of Kism, Henjam, and Hormuz, as a naval station, was the subject of much official correspondence between 1900 and 1905, and was emphasized by an Inter- Departmental Committee which met in October 1907" (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV,68). The committee reiterated that "such steps as His Majesty's Government might consider feasible should be taken to consolidate our positions at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, including Kishm." (Ibid. p. 73)

Among possibilities, they looked at the Qeshm Island, on which they had already occupied the small area of Basidu since 1820. A report written by Rear- Admiral Bosanquet, attached to an Admiralty letter dated 21 March 1902, states that "Kishm is, in my opinion, the most strategical position in the Persian Gulf, from a naval point of view, and its possession would be very important to us as a port for our mercantile marine and a coaling station for our ships of war" (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV, 73).

As the prospect of inducing the Persian government into any deal concerning its islands in the Strait of Hormuz was never promising, the British considered for a while the possibility of finding





a local independent sheikh or notable on the islands in whose name they could claim an island. In his telegram No. 66, dated 2 May 1901 and addressed to Secretary of State for India, Lord George Hamilton, Viceroy Curzon lamented that:

*“There are no independent local chiefs or authorities on the islands [of Hormuz, Hengam and Qeshm] with whom we could enter into relations. With the exception of the track in our possession at Bassidore, the islands are under Persian authority, and since Lieutenant Hunt’s visit, the Kalantar of Kishm, Sheikh Hasan, is said to have been superseded at the instance of the Director- General of Customs in Southern Persia by another official (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV,3).*

This communication is important as it demonstrates that the British tried to apply their method of creating “a chain of vassal states from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs” to Qeshm as well, endeavoring to “enter into relations” with local chiefs in order to turn them into their *protégés* and claim territory in their names. It also shows the Persians’ alertness at the time, which led to the sacking of the local official with whom the British had “entered into relations.”

#### V- Setting Sights on Hengam

The Iranian island of Hengam was another specific spot at the entrance to the Persian Gulf upon which the British focused in the early nineteenth century. Numerous communications by British officials, military and civil alike, indicate the strategic importance they attached to Hengam. They found that “[i]ts position off the Persian coast at a point where the Persian Gulf is so narrow that the Arabian coast is ordinarily visible gives it considerable strategic importance” (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV,109).

In letter No. 16 of 21 January 1904, referred to earlier, seven officials of the Foreign Department, Government of India, told the Secretary of State for India that “the British needed Henjam to provide for our ships a place of telegraphic call and signal station at no great distance from the entrance [of the Persian Gulf], and to



strengthen our hold upon the island of Kishm, where we already possess a British settlement at the western extremity . . . while Bassadore is rather out of the way and difficult of access except to small vessels, ships of any size can anchor temporarily off Henjam”(Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV, 245).

Consequently, the international status of Hengam formed the subject of considerable discussion. At one point, the application of the scheme of creating “a system of vassal states from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs” to Hengam was contemplated too. The British leaned towards the idea that “[c]areful examination of the available evidence suggests that the claims of Muscat [to the island] are substantial”, but finally they found it “impracticable for His Majesty’s Government, in view of their persistent recognition of Persian sovereignty over the last 60 years, to take any action at this stage to challenge the position of Persia” (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. I, 110).

To gain control of Hengam, it is striking that the British even considered a method analogous to the one they applied around the same time to the Tunbs and Abu Musa. In letter No. 16, one of the methods proposed is explained in the following way:

*“The Malik-ul-Tajar [of Persia] . . . erected a flag-pole on this foundation [on Hengam] some 12 years ago; but it does not appear that a flag was ever hoisted upon it, nor are there any representatives of the Persian Government now upon the island. In fact, so far as the Viceroy was able to ascertain, connections are maintained by the inhabitants [of Hengam] with the opposite or Arab coast of the Gulf that might almost entitle Hengam to be described as a derelict, upon which no trace of Persian sovereignty is now in existence.”*

After referring to a few incidents in relations between Persia and Britain, the letter continues:

*“And the general tone of unfriendliness that has characterized their recent communications, undoubtedly justify the adoption of a firm attitude, and will probably not have predisposed His Majesty’s Government to any unnecessary display of courtesy.” (Cambridge Archive Editions, 1987: Vol. IV, 246).*



Declassified Iranian documents relate that the Iranian government was aware of the strategic importance of the island and was sensitive to British activities there. A report sent from the Governorate of Persian Gulf ports, dated 17 Azar 1302 (8 December 1924), to the Iranian Foreign Ministry emphasized “the political and military importance of Hengam” and noted that,

“While the British had only received permission from the Persian Government for constructing a telegraph office, they turned the island into a support base for their military operations in Mesopotamia where they frequently sent warships at the beginning of the World War I, and established a water and coaling station and stationed a number of soldiers on the island.”

At some points in time and especially at the local level, the British actually claimed the island for the Sheikh of Muscat. A letter, dated 18 April 1906, from the Iranian Ministry of Customs and Post to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that the British warship *Fox* actively supported a group of armed Arabs who had tried to prevent a group of Iranian workers from constructing a building to be used as the customs office. According to this letter, the commander of the British warship prevented the Iranian soldiers from disembarking, “saying that the Island of Henjam appertained to the Sheikh of Muscat who is under the British protection.”

In the end and in view of “the persistent recognition of Persian sovereignty over the last 60 years” over Hengam, the British limited themselves to trying to resist the exercise of sovereignty by Iran over the island. As Sir Arthur Hardinge, the British Minister in Tehran, reported to the Marquess of Lansdowne, the Foreign Secretary, the Iranian Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs summoned him and read to him a telegram from the Governor of the Persian Gulf Ports “reporting that the Indo-European Telegraph Department’s officials at Henjam had removed the Persian flag and hoisted the British flag over the ruins of the old telegraph station reoccupied by them.” As Sir Arthur Hardinge reports, the Persian official regarded



the proceedings “as having, in connection with the recent incident respecting Tamb and Abumusa, some possible political significance.” In the same telegram, Hardinge recalls the Government of India’s opposition to “disturbing the status quo [on Henjam] by the introduction of Persian officials, and [recalls] Percy Cox, [the British Political Resident in the Persian Gulf] in reporting a rumour that the Customs Department intended to place a post there,” and suggests that “we might object to their doing so, but, though it would no doubt be preferable to keep Persian officials out of Henjam, where their appearance may be resented by Arabs, we can hardly claim a right to insist on this” (Institute for International and Political Studies (IIPS), 1989: 528).

Nonetheless, the Secretary to the Government of India, in Foreign Department telegram No. 2164 dated 6 July 1904 to Hardinge, expressed his objection to the establishment of a Persian customs post on Hengam, and gave four reasons: first, the need to maintain “the status quo”; second, the Persian coast was “already adequately protected by customs posts against contraband importation from Henjam and local trade on the island would not warrant the establishment of a post there”; third, “it might lead to regrettable friction with the telegraph officials”; and last, the “Arab Sheikh [of Hengam] threatened resistance to attempts to enforce Persian authority over them.” The telegram ended by observing that “we have already admitted Persian sovereignty, so that a post is not necessary to establish this” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 35).

Having failed to deter the Persian officials from establishing a customs office and placing a customs officer on the island, the British resorted to harassment tactics against the Persian customs officer and tried to incite the local Arabs against him. A telegram by Major Percy Cox, No. 59 dated 2 June 1905, records Cox’s attempt to meet with the Arab sheikh on the island and the stoppage of the water supply to the Persian customs post (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 67). Similar efforts are also referred to in British records: Major Cox telegraphed



on 7 December 1905 about the Sultan of Muscat's trip to Hengam and his protest against the Arabs of Hengam being "subjected to any form of Persian jurisdiction" (Burrell, 1997: 745). Captain Trevor, Assistant Political Resident, forwarded a letter on 28 October 1905 to the Government of India giving an account of a private interview between himself and the Sheikh of Arabs on Hengam on the extension of British protection to them (Burrell, 1997: 737).

Contrary to the approach of the British officials in the Persian Gulf and Bombay, Hardinge in Tehran recommended a moderate course of action. His letter, No. 39 dated 28 June 1905, to Major Cox, reads in part:

"Persian sovereignty being unquestionable at Henjam, our wisest plan appears to be to recognize it, with all its consequences, in an ungrudging spirit. Some of these consequences, such as the presence of the Customs Mirza, may be disagreeable and inconvenient, but I do not believe that we shall render them less so by such measures as trying to starve the Mirza out by cutting off his water supply, or displaying resentment at the presence of Persian flags, or encouraging the Arab villagers to believe that we sympathize with their dislike of Persian authority" (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 57).

It is also significant to note that the measures adopted by Iran on Hengam were aimed in part, as reported by Major Cox, "to prevent Englishmen from claiming the island later on" (Burrell, 1997: Vol. 2. 708). The Persian persistence led the British to adopt a new approach; namely, to create "a British enclave on a Persian island", as suggested by Viceroy Curzon in a telegram dated 27 September 1905 and sent to Grant Duff, the British Minister in Tehran, "by having the Persians remove their flags and buildings from British demarcated area, and opposition to the sending of Persian troops to the islands" (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 81). Grant Duff replied on 28 September 1905 that "if His Majesty's Government is prepared to threaten dispatch of Indian guard to Henjam, probably the Persian Government would consent to an arrangement on lines suggested,



but mere diplomatic pressure would fail on account of the Shah's and Grand Vizier's suspicions of our doings in south Persia" (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 81).

Finally, on 20 February 1906, the British Minister in Tehran formally informed the Persian foreign minister Mushir-ed-Dowleh that until the limits of the British telegraphic station at Hengam were satisfactorily settled, Britain "must object to any coercive action against the Arab residents on Henjam," and in such a case Britain "will be compelled to send a ship of war to the island." This mention of the settlement of the British station's limits was an allusion to the persistent British demand to appropriate a tract of land on the island of not less than 3 square miles. Grant Duff's telegram No. 169, dated 19 April 1906, indicates that the Persian foreign minister informed him that his government "cannot give the land claimed by His Majesty's Government, as this would lead to Russia making similar demands in the north" (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 108).

Iran's resistance to Britain's designs on the Iranian islands in the Strait of Hormuz brought the British to set sights on several other islands of strategic importance, located to the east of the Strait.

#### **VI- Seeking to Lease or Purchase the Islands in the Strait of Hormuz**

Seeking to obtain leasehold over a number of Iranian islands, especially those lying off the north shores of the Strait of Hormuz, was the last method with which the British tried to expand their control in the Persian Gulf. In 1913, the British focused their attention once again on the Strait of Hormuz and the Iranian islands along its north shores. The proposed Trans-Persian Railway was the new development that prompted them to take up the matter anew. On the assumption that the railway would touch coast at Bandar Abbas, the British Government of India proposed, in a telegram from the Government of India to the Secretary of State dated 8 January 1913, several alternatives that in its view were "necessary to secure



naval control of the Gulf.” The alternatives included such actions as “holding positions on Hormuz, Larak, and Kishm islands . . . and securing our positions in regard to [these] islands either by agreement with Persia or by *de facto* occupation” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. V. 89).

As telegram No. 107 dated 17 April 1914 from Walter Townley, British Minister in Tehran, suggests, while referring to the financial difficulties in which the Persian government found itself at the time, Townley broached for the first time the issue of purchase or acquisition on long lease of the islands of Larak, Hengam and the whole of Qeshm in a meeting with the Persian foreign minister. As his report to London suggests, the Iranian minister replied that “sale would be impossible but that lease might be arranged if terms were made attractive.” According to the telegram, the British Minister explained to his interlocutor that “a lease would of course imply a total surrender, for period of its duration, of the islands upon which British flag would be hoisted as H. M.’s Government might require” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. V. 95).

Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty, whose view had been solicited on the idea, stated in communication No. M-631/14 dated 5 May 1914 that “the control of the islands would undoubtedly be eminently desirable from the standpoint of naval and national interests.” It continues that “[t]he importance of these islands from a strategic point of view cannot be too strongly insisted upon. They command the only deep water sheltered anchorages in the southern end of the Gulf, and they provide a possible base from which the whole trade of the Gulf can be controlled, if necessary, in time of war...” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. V. 98-99).

The Viceroy of India followed suit and, in his telegram dated 22 May 1914, found that “both from the strategic and political points of view, the acquisition of Kishm, Henjam and Larak on a long lease, e.g., 99 years, is highly desirable and would greatly strengthen our position in the Gulf both now and prospectively.” Moreover, he strongly recommended the inclusion of the islands of Hormuz and



Shaikh Shuaib in the bargain (Schofield, 1990: Vol. V. 100).

With the persistence of Iran's financial difficulties, the British records show that Britain decided to take a shot at the possibility of purchasing the islands in question. A *note verbale* sent by the British Minister to the Persian government on 14 October 1914 contained an offer to purchase the islands. Referring to "the painful financial difficulties" the Persian government found itself in, the note proposed the sale to Britain of certain islands in the Persian Gulf in proximity of Bandar Abbas, specifically, Hormuz, Qeshm, Larak, Hengam and Shaikh Shuaib. The note proposes the payment of £300,000, plus cancellation of the Persian debt to Britain equaling £790,000.<sup>10</sup>

In reply, the Iranian Foreign Ministry sent a note, dated 1 November 1914, to the British Legation in Tehran, in which it was stated:

*"His Excellency no doubt concurs with me that the contents of his memorandum must have surprised and grieved the Persia Government. The Minister for Foreign Affairs feels sure that the British Government, who have on more difficult situations given their sincere support to Persia, would not take advantage of the Persian financial difficulties and make such proposals which the Persian Government would be unable to accept, and, if accepted, would bring her face to face with a more serious crisis".<sup>11</sup>*

In the covering letter, No. 1, Walter Townley explains that, given the delay in replying to his note, he had requested a meeting with the Iranian prime minister, Mostufi ul-Mamalek, and heard from him that "the scheme was one that was of such vital importance to Persia, since it concerned the sale of a portion of her territory, that the Government could not deal with it without the presence of the Madjless, which would meet in a very short time." And as noted in the note, the Prime Minister said in reply to his insistence for an assurance that the measure would be laid before the Madjless as soon as it assembled and would receive the strong support of the Cabinet, "Mustaufi ul-Mamalek did not commit himself to this, and said that





he must consult his colleagues” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. V. 104). In 1918, when the renewal of this offer was under consideration, the addition of the three Iranian islands of Hinderabi, Kish and Farur to the list to be communicated to Persia was approved (Schofield, 1990: Vol. V. 105).

### VII- The Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs

The purpose of this paper is not to deal with the way the British tried to control Abu Musa and the Tunbs by claiming them for its Arab *protégés*. However, having partly described the way the British attempted to control the Iranian islands during their stay in the Persian Gulf, it is appropriate to refer very briefly to one episode in the long and thorny history of Britain dealing with these three islands, as it fully fits the general pattern discussed above. In this specific case, Britain showed especial inflexibility after it lost its bid to control other Iranian islands, especially those lining the north shores of the Strait of Hormuz:

In April 1904, and upon instruction from the Iranian government, an Iranian mission led by the Director of Customs in the south, which was visiting Abu Musa and the Tunbs to implement the government decision to set up a customs office on the island, unexpectedly came across a raised Arab flag, hauled it down and hoisted the Iranian flag in its stead. The British considered this to be “a proceeding initiated by the Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs, possibly at Russian instigation (Hawley, 1970: 162).

Having received information on this incident from the British Political Resident in Persian Gulf, the Government of India reported it to the India Office on 13 April 1904 (Telegram No. 130) and indicated that it “is important that the Persian flag should be taken down and Arab flag reinstated, and that removal of guards should be effected at once” and proposed “to send gun-boat to the islands, with representative of the Shaikh of Shargah on board, to haul down Persian flag and reinstate Arab flag, and to remove guards to Persian



territory” – a proposal that came from Viceroy Curzon himself.

While the British Government of India recommended a swift and decisive counter-action and resort to the ships of war, the British Minister in Tehran counseled to first try to gain the same result through the diplomatic path. A. Hardinge, whose view had been sought by the Foreign Office on the Viceroy’s proposal, recalled in his telegram, No. 165 dated 20 April 1904, that, “[h]owever, [Tunb and Abu Musa] are coloured Persian in India Survey Map of 1897 and Viceroy’s unofficial Map of 1892.” He adds that “it is clear that the rights acquired by Shaikh of Sharga must be supported; but before the Persian flag is hauled down it would be courteous to give the Persian Government chance of themselves removing it” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 376).

Finally, the view of A. Hardinge prevailed and was followed by a series of demarches before the Iranian Government, including the threat of force. Later, facing a British ultimatum, Iran’s Foreign Minister Mushir al-Dowleh sent a note, dated 14 June 1904, to the British Embassy in Tehran “with reference to the islands of Tamb and Abu Musa”, which stated that,

*“The Persian Government considers these two islands as its own property, and the measures taken by the Customs authorities in those two places have been on this account; but, . . . the Royal Command has been issued that, for the present, the measures taken by the Customs authorities in the abovementioned places should be given up and neither party hoist flags in the two places pending the settlement of the question.”<sup>12</sup>*

Following the Persian agreement to remove their flags from Tunb and Abu Musa, Major Cox sent an important and interesting letter, No. 64 of 11 June 1904, to Sheikh Suggar, the ruler of Sharjah, informing him of “recent proceedings”. He went on to say “I accordingly request you to take the necessary measures for . . . hoisting the special Jowasmi flag described in the Treaty.” He also inform him that His Majesty’s ship *Sphinx* is now proceeding to your coast in this connection, and you should make most careful



arrangements in regard to all matters affecting these two islands, and should station two men on each of them, whose duty it will be to see to the hoisting and guarding of the flags permanently. He continues that “you can send [the men] by the ship *Sphinx*” and “if the old flagstaffs are unserviceable and you wish to put up new ones, Inshallah, the Captain will assist you in the matter” (Schofield, 1990: Vol. IV. 388).

Failure to be a match for British military power, as demonstrated in the Anglo-Iranian War of 1857 in general, the lack of a naval force worthy of the name in particular, and the explicit British threat to use force were the main reasons for the inability of the Iranian central government to resist the British move. Tehran, at the time, could not rely on any means of enforcement, and its weak navy was not a match for the British flotilla. Consequently, when in 1904 the British plainly threatened to use military force against the Iranian presence on Abu Musa, the Iranian government saw no option but to submit to the *force majeure*.

British strategic considerations lied at the heart of the calculations that made them so adamant in holding to their positions on Abu Musa and the Tunbs for close to 70 years, despite the tensions that this created in British relations with the Iranians.

### Conclusion

This paper did not mean to be exhaustive in terms of the British direct or indirect claim over the Iranian Islands in the Persian Gulf, as the full story would not fit the scope of a paper and requires a book size research. Nonetheless, this summary demonstrates the British tactics of trying to control the Gulf's islands, including through claiming them for Arab Sheikhs under British protection.

Relying on British arguments in favor of the Arab Sheikhs' title to the three islands, radical Arabs used these islands as pawns amid the animosity and conflict that pitted them against monarchical Iran. Later, following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the conservative-



moderate Arab camp tried to use it against Islamic Republic of Iran.

On the eve of their withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, the British approached the issue of the islands with expediency and self-interested strategic calculation with which they tried to work out a half-solution among the regional players. Jack Straw, the former British Foreign Secretary, while reviewing current border and territorial conflicts and disputes in Asia and the Middle East, explicitly admitted in an interview that “[a] lot of the problems we are having to deal with now, I have to deal with now, are a consequence of our colonial past.” In drawing up a list of British historical errors, he mentioned Kashmir, Palestine, Afghanistan, the Iraqi borders and Africa (Kampfner, 2002). Omitted by Jack Straw – maybe because it seems a minor issue compared to those others – is the sovereignty of the three islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb.

## Notes

1. For a thorough discussion on this issue, see: (Ahmadi, 2008)
2. From the letter dated 16 May 1821, in Volume 20 of 1820–21, from the Bombay Government to Dr Jukes, British envoy to the Persian Gulf, deputed to allay the alarm felt in Persia about the British proceedings in the Persian Gulf, page 592, Cited in: (Schofield , 1990: Vol. I. 667)
3. Bombay Government to the Government of India, dated 9 March 1822, No. 469, Vol. 91 of 1822. Cited in: (Schofield , 1990: Vol. I. 673)
4. Institute for International and Political Studies (IIPS). 1989. Memorandum by the First Political Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 16 Ordibehesht 1307 (6 May 1929). In: (Institute for International and Political Studies (IIPS), 1989: 399)
5. F. O. 60/17, M. Elphinstone to H. Willock, 15 Dec. 1819. Cited in: (Tadjbakhche, 1960: 58-9)
6. For the full text of the Treaty of Shiraz, see: (Schofield , 1990: Vol. I. 681)
7. F. O. 248/48, cited in: (Tadjbakhche, 1960: 74) With regard to the reaction of Bombay also see: (Kelly,1968: 190)
8. For a history of Iranian protest against British handling of Bahrain's affairs from 1928 to 1953, see: (Cambridge Archive Editions,1987: Vol. II. 38–9)
9. For a description of the Anglo-Persian War of 1857, see: (Kelly,1968:Vol. II 405)
10. Enclosure 1 in No. 1, dated 12 Nov. 1914, in: (Schofield , 1990: Vol. V. 105)
11. Enclosure 2 in No. 1, dated 12 Nov. 1914, in: (Schofield , 1990: Vol. V. 106)
12. From Hardinge to Foreign Secretary, Enclosure 1 in No. 25 dated 14 June 1904, Cited in: (Schofield , 1990: Vol. IV. 386)

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