

# Ba'athist Iraq and the Three Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs The Genesis and Development of an Issue

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an account of the controversy between Iran and Iraq over the issue of the three Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs. It covers the time span from 1971 up to 1992 and focuses on the role of Iraq that hoisted the banner of opposition to Iran's title to these islands, following the British withdrawal, and sought to spur the reluctant Arab conservative camp along.

The paper seeks to describe how Iraq was on the driving seat on the issue at hand and how others, including the UAE, followed it reluctantly. To elucidate the point, the paper begins to review briefly the causes of enmity, real or perceived, that pitted Tehran and Baghdad against each other up to 2003. It is followed by depicting the leading role Iraq played in placing Iran's move on the islands on the Arab agenda. It continues by reviewing the tactics Iraq used to keep the pressure on and revive the issue after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

To conclude, the paper briefly refers to the reasons for Iraq's failure in its efforts with regard to the islands and the new circumstances in 1992 under which the UAE could take initiative for the first time on the islands issue. It seeks to show that the activity and/or dormancy around the islands issue depend rather on the regional status and power politics involving regional and global major actors.

**Keywords:** Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands, Ba'athist Iraq, UN Security Council, Iran-Iraq War

## Introduction

Since the announcement in January 1968 of the British plan for withdrawal from the Persian Gulf and Iran's reassertion of its control over the three islands in November 1971, pan-Arab nationalism, led by Iraq, took the initiative and played the leading role in opposing Iran's move. It tried to revive the issue intermittently and spared no possible effort in galvanizing Arab circles in regard to the three islands.

As the British were preparing to withdraw their forces, the new Iraqi Ba'athist government was developing its own agenda in the Persian Gulf; an agenda that ran drastically counter to that of imperial Iran. This conflict soon focused, *inter alia*, on the issue of the three islands and, ironically, the banner of opposition to Iran's title to these islands, which the British struck on the eve of their departure, was hoisted by Ba'athi Iraq.

Baghdad, notably, led the anti-Iranian pack from this period, and the active hostility shown by the Iraqi government endured for many years, in fact, up to the conclusion of the Algiers Accord between Iran and Iraq in March 1975. The effort was resumed in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the process, it widely affected several aspects of Iraq's foreign policy, including its relations with Kuwait and the Persian Gulf

sheikhdoms. Arab sources subscribing to Arab radicals' views on the issue of the three islands admit that '[a]s a matter of fact, only Iraq challenged the Iranian occupation of these islands. Even the United Arab Emirates itself – except for complaining for a short time – kept silent about the matter, at the request of the British.' (Ali, Omar. 1993, 12)(1)

### **1. Fifty five years of tension**

For fifty five years since the 1958 Iraqi coup up to the collapse of the Saddam regime in 2003, the Iran-Iraq relationship was unique in terms of the tension it experienced and the conflict it went through. Antagonism between Iran and pan-Arab nationalists had begun in mid-1950s with Nasser and the Shah colliding mostly due to their differing ideologies and global orientations. With rising hostility between the two sides, the Persian Gulf turned into their primary theatre of tension and rivalry, giving rise to a host of disputes between them at a time when this stretch of water was gaining increasing importance due to oil and big power politics. The tensions resulted in a regional cold war that ran in parallel with and was intensified by the global East-West Cold War.

With the advent of the Iraqi republicans in 1958, a whole new chapter opened in Arab-Iranian relations laden with tension and conflict. Although Egypt opted gradually out of the Arab hard-line camp and normalized its relationship with Iran following the six-day war in 1967, Iraq hardened its position against Iran in the wake of the Ba'athist coup in 1968, climaxing



in the eight-year war in the 1980s. While Iran, both under the Shah and the Islamic Republic, could reach understanding with either moderate or radical Arab governments respectively, Iraq was always an exception.

Burdened with an inherited legacy of intermittent and inconclusive wars between the Ottoman and Persian empires, and following its own geopolitical interests in the Persian Gulf along with its own ideological persuasion, Iraq soon placed itself at the forefront of the Arabs opposing Iran on every issue; the dispute over the nomenclature of the Persian Gulf, laying claim to Iran's oil province Khuzestan, the issue of the three islands, etc. There were continuous sources of dispute and rivalry between Iran and Iraq, and interestingly enough, largely regardless of the nature of the ruling political establishment in either country. Even when both countries were ruled by conservative, monarchical regimes from the 1920s to the 1950s, the similarity of their political orientations did not preclude controversy over disputed boundary. They did, however, cooperate to counter common threats against their conservative regimes. After the 1958 Ba'athist coup in Iraq, however, common interests evaporated and rivalries between the two countries took on a strong ideological aspect as well.

Motivated by ideologies, power politics, and differing global outlooks, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party abused these otherwise mostly workable disputes between the two neighbors and blew them out of any proportion. With a view to shaping Iraq's Arab identity in their own way and turning it into the role model for the Arab identity as opposed to Iran, the Ba'ath Party,



convinced of its messianic pan-Arab role and bent on establishing a new socialist revolutionary order in a unified Arab world under its leadership, saw Iraq as the launching pad from which to overthrow the predominant conservative political status quo in the Persian Gulf. The means Iraq used to achieve this goal included demonizing 'the Persians', racially profiling them and historicizing to claim endemic and deep Arab-Persian enmity throughout history.

Baghdad efforts to address its perceived geopolitical predicament and its resulting implications served as another factor determining its foreign policy vis-à-vis the Persian Gulf, in general, and its immediate neighbors on the Gulf, Iran and Kuwait, in particular. While the Iranian coastline stretches the full length of the northern Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, the Iraqi coastline of mere 40 kilometers is short and shallow, and the Iraqi seaports on the Shatt al-Arab waterway unreliable. Iran's insistence that the fluvial border along this water way should follow the thalweg line, i.e. the deepest navigational channel in accordance with recognized international principles, exacerbated Iraq's dilemma in this respect. Moreover, the Iraqi strategic depth vis-à-vis Iran is insignificant, and all its important centers of population, business and industry lie within 150 kilometers of the Iranian border. This perceived problem led Baghdad to begin laying claim, not only to Khuzestan, but also to Kuwait in 1961, with discrediting impact on Iraq's efforts to find a foothold in the Gulf's Arab littoral. This approach climaxed in two regional wars against Iran (1980) and Kuwait (1990).



The inter-Arab politics, especially the rivalry between Iraq and Egypt since the monarchical time, also was a constant source of instability in the region. Gulf politics was one of the most important prizes in this power politics. To gain upper hand in this rivalry, Iraqi nationalists, in general, and Iraqi Ba'athists since 1968, in particular, attached top priority to achieving predominance in the Persian Gulf region as a prelude to gaining Arab credential for realizing Iraq's ultimate dream, i.e., the leadership of the Arab world.

Considering the Gulf to be of an 'Arab character' and vowing to safeguard what they called 'Arabism of the Gulf' lay at the center of republican Iraq's Gulf policy. It was adopted following the 1958 coup and blossomed under the Ba'athist regime during the 1968-2003 period. Baghdad's primary role lay in the preservation of the Arab nature of the Gulf by combating what it described as Iranian invasion. (Abdulghani 1984, 77) By virtue of its Arab nationalist outlook and the size of Iraqi territory, Ba'athists portrayed Iraq as the sole 'guardian of the Gulf's Arab character' and the integrity of the Arab homeland and believed that it 'carries the main burden in safeguarding the area.' (Ibid.) Moreover, increase in oil production led Iraq's leaders to pay more attention to the main route of its exports to the outside world, that is, the Persian Gulf.

Iran's swift action to fill the impending vacuum following the British announcement in January 1968 heightened further the sensitivity of the Iraqis with regard to developments in the Gulf. From this juncture on, Iranian moves became, in fact, an important factor in shaping Iraqi attitudes in foreign policy and

even affected certain important aspects of Iraqi domestic policy.

Thus, the islands issue was just another element then added to the historic rivalry between Iran and Iraq, reinvigorated by their modern-time clashing perceptions of national interests. Prior to the clash over the three islands, the Iran-Iraq relationship was hostile over the Shatt al-Arab standoff. The Iraqi ultimatum to Iran, warning it to respect Shatt al-Arab as Iraq's internal water on 15 April 1969, which led to the Iranian counter-claim repudiating the 1937 treaty and asserting the thalweg line as border, had already exacerbated Iran–Iraq relations. Iraqi reactions to that move had included the expulsion of Iraqis of Iranian origin; the provision of assistance to Iranian dissidents, and revival of the claim to the Iranian province of Khuzestan and by forming the 'Popular Front for Liberation of Arabistan'. All in all, Iran, assisted by the entire West, regarded itself as the guardian of the regional status quo and as provider of security to the conservative establishments in the region, including the sheikhdoms. Conversely, Baghdad, in treaty relationship with Moscow, perceived itself as the standard-bearer of revolutionary change, militancy and Arab nationalism in the Persian Gulf. As such, there could be no let-up in its enmity-ridden rivalry with an Iran that befriended the West and was determined to safeguard the Persian Gulf region against the powerful waves of pan-Arab nationalism and radicalism.

## **2. Iraq's reaction against Iran's move on the three islands**

Iran's move on the three islands on 30 November 1971 and the





indications of British support triggered an explosive Iraqi response against those countries, including the rupture of diplomatic relations with Britain and Iran, the nationalization of the remaining British holdings of the Iraq Petroleum Company, sporadic skirmishes along Iran–Iraq borders, the expulsion of Iraqis of Iranian origin from Iraq, and taking the issue to the United Nations.

On the day that Iran's troops landed on the islands, Baghdad radio announced that Iraq had decided to break off diplomatic relations with Britain and Iran, because of Iran's 'flagrant aggression in collusion with Britain' against the Abu Musa Island and the Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands. Following up on that, Baghdad radio reported on 5 December that the Iraqi Foreign Ministry had ordered the British ambassador and the chargé d'affaires at the Iranian Embassy to leave Baghdad by 12 December, and their respective staffs to leave by 16 December. (Mostyn 1991, 120)

The Iraqi Government also expelled thousands of theology students, pilgrims and businessmen 'accused of being of Iranian origin', despite their having been in Iraq for generations. On 30 December 1971, 60,000 'Iranians' were deported from Iraq. It was reported that Iraq expelled another 60,000 Iranians, including women and children, from its territory in a span of few days thereafter, which continued for several months at the rate of 1000 per day as the Iranian sources claimed (Ibid., 122). In a speech on 31 December, Saddam Hussein, Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, said that Iraq was deporting all aliens who had entered Iraq illegally. (Ibid., 121)



### 3. Iraq's moves at the United Nations

On the multilateral scene, Iraq, joined by Libya, Algeria and South Yemen, took the case of the three islands to the UN Security Council. In a letter dated 3 December 1971 and addressed to the President of the Security Council, the permanent representatives of these four member states requested 'an urgent meeting of the Security Council to consider the dangerous situation in the Arabian Gulf area arising from the occupation by the armed forces of Iran of the Islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb on November 30, 1971.' (UN Doc. S/10409 of 3 Dec. 1971) It is interesting to note that the complainants, disregarding the Memorandum of Understanding between Iran and the Sheikh of Sharjah on the island of Abu Musa, also included it in their letter. This letter put the issue on the agenda of the Security Council and enabled different groupings of Arab countries with varying political inclinations to activate it in accordance with prevailing situations subsequently.

Furthermore, Talib El-Shibib, Iraq's permanent representative to the UN, in another letter, dated 7 December 1971 and addressed to the UN Secretary-General, transmitted 'the text of a cable received by [his] Government from the Ruler of Ras al-Khaima.' In the cable, after a description of the events of 30 November, it is stated that 'the two islands of Tunb are and have always been, since ancient times, an indivisible part of the territory of Ras al-Khaima, and their occupation by Iran is a blatant aggression not only against Ras al-Khaima alone, but



against all the Arab people.’ (UN Doc. S/10434 of 7 Dec. 1971)

Acting on the letter dated 3 December, the President of the Security Council held a meeting on 9 December 1971 to consider the issue. As it is the only Security Council meeting ever held on this subject, it warrants a thorough consideration.

The following points are noteworthy:

■ The representative of Iraq sat at the Council table as the counterpart to the Iranian representative, and the remaining representatives on the list of speakers, including that of UAE, sat on the side of the Council Chamber. In other words, Iraq stood as the main complainant challenging Iran on the issue at hand. Note also should be taken of the fact that, as indicated by the President of the Council, the UAE’s request to participate in the debate was received by the President while the meeting was already in progress.

■ The Iraqi representative was the first speaker on the issue. He said he had come to the Council ‘to submit not the complaint of [his] own Government only, but also that of a small and helpless Arab State, which has no means to defend itself against the aggression.’ He rejected the Memorandum of Understanding between Iran and Sharjah, arguing that on the basis of the exclusive agreement between Britain and the Trucial States, ‘the alleged agreement between the Government of Iran and the Ruler of Al-Sharja was concluded at a time when the latter had not yet fully regained the right to enter into any international commitment’. He went on to consider ‘[t]he invasion of the Tunb islands and the partial occupation of the island of Abu Musa’ to be ‘the latest step in a policy of

expansion by the Government of Iran, a blatant demonstration of the collusion between Iran and the United Kingdom Government.'

■ The Iraqi representative dealt extensively with the Persian Gulf's general issues. He said: "the Strait of Hormuz and the strategic three islands now illegally occupied by Iran do control the lifeline of the littoral states, which have no outlet to the high seas other than through the Strait. Iraq is among those States, whereas Iran . . . has direct outlets on the Arabian Sea." He further stated that "We reject the appointment of Iran, or any other single state, as guardian or guarantor of the continuation of the flow of oil to the outside world. Iraq also rejects the control by Iran of the only outlet of Iraq's commerce to the high seas."

■ The Iraqi representative, in making a second statement in exercise of the right of reply, said: "I asked [the UK representative] two questions and he answered neither of them. The first was: were these islands Arab, and did they belong to Sharjah and Ras al-Khaima? I do not think we have received an answer to that question. The second question was: was not Britain duty bound to defend the territorial integrity of these islands until the final second of the expiration of British responsibility for their protection and defense, or do British obligations have a duration of a period minus one or two days? Is this a new precedent in respect of treaties and the carrying out of obligations of States?"

■ Colin Crowe, the British permanent representative, in his statement in the Council, referring to the Tunbs, said: "Both



islands lie near the Iranian shore and have long been claimed by Iran. For many years the British Government has been trying to bring about an agreed solution between Iran and the Ruler.” He went on to say: “The ending of Britain’s special position and responsibilities with the Gulf has inevitably meant the striking of a balance between the conflicting claims of neighbouring States, and the taking into account of realities.” He portrayed the outcome of the efforts as “a reasonable and acceptable basis for the future security of the area“, and added “I cannot see how the representative of Iraq can describe the present situation as dangerous or as threat to peace.” This statement marked the formal discontinuance of the British policy of adamantly claiming the three islands for their protégés on the Arab littoral. Just as that policy had been born of mainly strategic considerations, it was laid to rest owing to much the same kind of consideration, albeit these were of a different nature in the new era.

■ The Iranian representative, Amir Khosrow Afshar, told the meeting in his brief statement that “We strongly believe that it is for the Persian Gulf States alone to deal with this vital international waterway . . . any interference by outside Powers in the affairs of the Persian Gulf would undoubtedly endanger peace and stability in the area.” He also stated that the Libyan Minister of Industry had declared to the press in Kuwait that Libya planned to dispatch troops to occupy the islands.

■ The representative of Somalia, a member of the Arab League, helped find a way out: “In the view of my delegation it would be precipitate at this stage to recommend any recourse



under Article 36. I say this because my delegation understands that some States friendly to both the complainants and Iran have initiated contact, at government level, in an attempt to bring both sides together so that the matter might be resolved without acrimony and with justice.” He further stated that “My delegation would therefore suggest that the Council defer consideration of this matter to a later date, so that sufficient time is allowed for these efforts of quiet diplomacy to work and to materialize.”

■ The President of the Security Council, repeating the suggestion made by the Somali representative and hearing no objection, proceeded accordingly. The meeting came thus to an end, and the three islands issue, despite remaining on the agenda of the Council as per established practice, has never again been discussed in a Council meeting. Subsequent efforts by some Arab governments, especially since 1992, have failed to revive the council’s serious interest in the issue.

It should also be noted that only six out of 22 Arab countries spoke in this open debate, which had been requested by four Arab countries. (UN Doc. S/PV-1610 of 9 Dec. 1971)

In the debate at the UN General Assembly on the admission of the United Arab Emirates to membership in the United Nations, the radical Arab states brought strong pressure to bear on the UAE in respect of the three islands issue. South Yemen’s representative accused “the rulers of the so-called UAE and their patrons” of reacting “passively in complete apathy and utter connivance” against the Iranian action on the three islands, and described it as the “selling out of part of the



territory of the Arabian Gulf.” (UNGA Official Records, 26th Session, A/PV/.2007 of 9 Dec. 1971) In the recorded vote that followed, South Yemen voted against admission of the UAE to the United Nations and Iraq was absent. (Ibid., 1- 2)

In the closing part of his statement in the General Assembly, Adnan Pachachi, the UAE’s representative, touched briefly upon the issue of the three islands, “expressing the deep regret felt by the people and the Government of the UAE at the action taken by Iran in forcibly occupying some Arab islands in the Gulf.” He described the Iranian action in using force to settle a territorial dispute “not only contrary to the Charter of the UN, but also incompatible with the traditional friendship that has bound together the Arab and Iranian peoples.” (Ibid. 5)

The only other action taken collectively by a group of Arab countries at the United Nations before the Islamic Revolution was the issuance of a letter, dated 18 July 1972, addressed to the Secretary-General and signed by the representatives of 14 Arab states, reiterating their position that the three islands are Arab. Jordan, North Yemen, Somalia, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – all enjoying close political relations with Iran at the time - did not join in. (UN Doc. S/10740 of 18 July 1972)

The July 1972 letter was the last letter to the United Nations on the islands before the one sent to the UN Secretary-General by Sadoon Hammadi, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iraq, eight years later in April 1980, referred to later. In the UN General Assembly, too, the UAE did not raise the issue of the three islands on its own initiative or in its main statements up until 1992 – not discussed in this essay. Nonetheless, in this



span of time, UAE officials were twice dragged by Iraq into responding to Iran's reactions to Iraqi statements in exercise of the right of reply. (UN GA Official Records, 27th Session, A/PV/.2043, and 28th Session, A/PV/.2135) Iraq was, thus, the only country that continued bringing up the issue of the three islands for two more years - 1972 (UNGA Official Records, 27th Session, A/PV/.2055, of 5 Oct. 1972), and 1973 (28th Session, A/PV/.2055, of 1 Oct. 1973), using it as a tool in its disputes with Iran over a range of issues, before declining to raise it in 1974 and shelving it after 1975 when an agreement was reached with Iran over a wide range of outstanding issues between the two countries, including on land and water boundaries – most notably ending the dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway - that had pitted the two countries against each other.

The Arab conservatives and moderates, in general, did not follow Iraq's lead in reacting to the landing of Iran's troops on the islands, and, as an important sign, they did not take part in the Iraqi action at the UN Security Council against Iran. Egypt, apprehensive over the growing tension in the Persian Gulf and fearing that it might overshadow the Arab-Israeli dispute, appealed for moderation. It called upon Iran to withdraw from the islands and to enter into negotiations to attain a just and peaceful settlement. Saudi Arabia, as a conservative and pro-Western state, indicated only its dissatisfaction with the Iranian move and did not even directly urge an Iranian pullout. Nor did it take part in the meeting of the Security Council held on 9 December 1971.





#### 4. Iraq's Aggressive Foreign Policy Following the Islands' Episode

The Iraqis contended that their policy towards any Persian Gulf Arab state was contingent on that state's concern and respect for the core interests of Arabism of the Gulf. Hence, the criterion was the adherence to, and safeguarding of, Arab nationalist interests. In the words of Saddam Hussein at the Eighth Congress of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, held in Iraq in January 1974:

“We cannot have a normal relationship with a state which relies on a foreign country and uses forces of that country against our Arab people. We shall establish a normal relationship with any state which shows concern for the soil of the [Arab] homeland and the Arabism of the homeland in the Gulf.” (Abdulghani 1984, 80)

Irritated by the indifference of other Arab states over the issue of the three islands, the same Political Report went on:

“These [conservative Gulf] regimes did not oppose the threats to the Arab character of the Gulf with an effective policy, in spite of the pressure of public opinion within the area and elsewhere in the Arab homeland. ... These regimes' alliance – especially at this point – with the Saudi Arabia, which has an essential role in the imperialist plan for the Arabian Gulf, gave Saudi reaction a free hand and an effective political



cover for it to exert great influence on the area, in collaboration with the Iranian regime and the reactionary regimes of the Gulf.'... 'Other Arab regimes paid no attention to events in the Gulf, either willfully or from heedlessness, and were not prepared to participate in resistance to the danger. On the contrary, most tried directly or indirectly to suggest that Iraq's concern for this subject and its appeals for action were but a pretext for avoiding its obligations in the Palestinian arena.' (Ismael 1982, 86)

On the basis of this policy, Iraq refused to recognize the newly established federation of the United Arab Emirates in protest against Sharjah's agreement with Iran on Abu Musa. The Iraqi government made its recognition of the UAE conditional upon the latter's cancellation of the agreement and upon its commitment not to establish diplomatic relations with Iran before Iran returned the three islands (*Arab Report and Record* December 1–15, 1971, 622) – a demand that went unheeded.

More importantly, evidence suggests that Iraq matched its public criticism of Iran's restoration of sovereignty over the islands with active attempts to subvert the process:

■ An aborted coup on 24 January 1972 by a rebel force of eighteen, led by Sheikh Saqr ibn Sultan, the ruler's cousin, who had been deposed as ruler in 1965 and since lived in Cairo, disrupted Sharjah. It resulted in the killing of the ruler, Sheikh Khaled bin Muhammad al-Qasimi, who had signed the Memorandum of Understanding with Iran, and nine members



of his family. (Anthony 1975, 115-18) Despite the death of Sheikh Khaled, the coup failed and Sheikh Khaled's brother replaced him.

■ Sharjah's authorities alleged, on 7 February 1972, that arms used in the attempted coup had been shipped from Basra with Iraqi connivance. In December, 71 shots were fired at Sheikh Saqr ibn Muhammad, Sharjah's deputy ruler, but only grazed his shoulder. Sheikh Saqr had represented his brother, Sheikh Khaled, in receiving the Iranian landing party on Abu Musa Island on 30 November 1971. (Mostyn 1991, 122-3)

■ Sharjah's new ruler, Sheikh Sultan ibn Muhammad, said in an interview on 2 February 1972 that he would keep to his brother's agreement with Iran on the partial occupation of Abu Musa, but would try to achieve a new understanding with the Shah on the issue. (Ibid., 123)

■ Lebanese newspapers reported on 17 February 1972 that ten suitcases seized at Manama airport contain machine guns and other weapons. Classified as diplomatic mail, the suitcases were carried by an Iraqi diplomatic official, Abd al-Hamid Kharbit, and contained machine guns, hand grenades, bazookas, small arms and ammunitions. Kharbit was quoted as telling the Bahraini authorities that the arms were gifts from the Iraqi Government to the leaders of Bahrain in view of "their well-known love of hunting." (Ibid., 123)

The Iraqi government in its hostility against Iran went so far as equating 'Persian nationalism' with Zionism. It considered its primary role to be the preservation of the Arab nature of the Gulf and the integrity of the Arab homeland by combating what



it described as systematic Persian infiltration of the Arab side of the Gulf. The Political Report of the Eighth Congress of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, held in Iraq in January 1974, drew a parallel between Palestine and the Gulf: it saw the centre of the conflict as a struggle between Arab nationalism on the one hand, and Zionism and Persian nationalism on the other. Immigration and settlement of the Persians in the Gulf sheikhdoms was described by Iraq "as a colonialist phenomenon, posing a threat to the Arabism of the Persian Gulf analogous to the Zionist colonization of Palestine." (Ismael 1982, 29)

In the absence of friendly relations between Iraq and major Arab states and its isolation in the conservative Arab world, including in the Persian Gulf, Iraq's reactions to the restoration of Iranian sovereignty over the islands included the strengthening of its relationship with the socialist camp as well. Al-Bakr, the Iraqi president, declared in 1972 that "the confrontation against Israel and the protection of Arabism of the Gulf required augmenting ties with the international forces supporting Arab rights, especially the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China." (Shemesh 1992, 60) This and what followed it, that is, the conclusion of the Friendship Treaty between Iraq and the Soviet Union the same year, demonstrated how far Baghdad was ready to go in its enmity against Iran.

During the exchange of visits by Saddam Hussein and Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin in February and April 1972, respectively, the Iraqis tried unsuccessfully to insert language into their joint statements deploring the Iranian move on the three islands. (Ibid., 64)



The islands event also helped lead to Iraqi pressure on Kuwait with regard to the islands of Verba and Bubiyan. Iraq's foreign minister stated in April 1973 that without these islands, Iraq could not become a Gulf power, and hence Iraqi control of the islands constituted a prerequisite for the delineation of the Kuwait–Iraq borders. (Abdulghani 1984, 98) In the aftermath of its signing with Iran of the 1975 Treaty concerning the Frontier and Neighbourly relations between Iran and Iraq (13 June 1975, Baghdad), Iraq moved gradually away from its ultra-radical, anti-Zionist stance as its attention became focused on its role in the Persian Gulf. between 1975 and 1979 the relations between the two countries appeared to be normal, devoid of open tension or conflict, and despite progress on the demarcation of the common land frontier, the dispute over a number of small pockets of land remained unresolved – to be used by Iraq as part of the complaints/excuses in unilaterally abrogating the Treaty in Summer 1980 in the run-up to the military invasion of Iran.

### 5. The Revival of Iraq's Interest in the Three Islands

While Iran was undergoing a tumultuous period after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the details of its foreign policy were yet to be worked out, the Iraqi government, as early as June 1979 – around four months after the Revolution – began claiming the three islands for 'the Arabs', thus trying to bring a long period of dormancy of the issue to an end. The two Iraqi government newspapers, *Al-Thawrah* – the government-run

paper – and *Al-Jumhuriyah* – the Ba'ath Party-run paper – raised the issue of “the occupation of the Arab islands – Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa.” (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 19 June 1979)

Tariq Aziz, a member of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council and the deputy prime minister, was the first Iraqi official that broached the issue of the three islands. He stated in August 1979 that Iraq would like to stress one central issue, namely “the Arabism of the Gulf and the need to keep the Gulf area from any kind of foreign influence.” Aziz also said that Iraq considered the three islands ‘to be Arab’ and believed that “a friend should deal with the Arab nation from the position of friendship in every way and on all levels.” (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 21 August 1979)

On 3 November 1979, Iraq first formally demanded the revision of the Algiers Accord of 1975. Iraq also said that “Iran must give up three Gulf islands and provide self-rule for Iran's Arab, Kurdish and Baluch minorities.” Iraq's ambassador to Lebanon, Abdul-Hussein Moslem Hassan, said in an interview with *An-Nahar* on 3 November 1979 that the improvement of relations between Iran and Iraq depended on the realization of the following conditions:

- Revision of the 1975 Algiers Agreement with regard to Shatt al-Arab;
- Granting of autonomy to Kurd, Baluchi and Arab minorities in Iran; and
- Withdrawal of the Iranian armed forces from the Tunb and Abu Musa islands. (Rajaei 1993, 18 and Mostyn 1991, 169)



Ratcheting up the controversy, the next Iraqi move was to raise the issue at the United Nations. Iraq's foreign minister, in a letter to the UN Secretary-General, demanded an immediate Iranian withdrawal from the three islands, the official Iraqi news agency reported on 6 April 1980. (Associated Press, 6 April 1980) This letter could have been intended to precede an attempt by Iraq to attack and occupy the three islands, as described later.

In a speech on 15 April 1980, Saddam Hussein who had already ascended to the position of president of Iraq, recounted his talks with Iran's foreign minister, Ibrahim Yazdi, on the margins of the meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Havana in 1980, saying, among other things:

I said to him: first you have behaved badly towards us and you should stop this immediately. He replied: What more? I said: The three Arab islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa are Arab and should be returned to their owners [prolonged cheers]. He said: What more? ...." (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 18 April 1980)

In June 1980, Saddam said in a speech: "We now have the military strength to take back the three islands ...occupied by the Shah. We have never remained silent since the occupation of these three islands and have constantly prepared ourselves militarily and economically to recapture them." (Rajaei 1993, 21) Simultaneously, a number of visits between Saddam and Kuwaiti



and Saudi officials took place between May and August 1980 and further contacts were pursued with Oman and Ras al-Khaimah with the seeming objective of building an anti-Iranian axis (Marschall 2003, 67), which, as it turned out, culminated in the military invasion of Iran on 22 September 1980.

## 6. A Plan to Attack and Seize the Three Islands

Evidence and recurring reports suggest that Iraq in its obsession with the issue of the three islands went so far as to plan to invade and occupy them. According to a Middle East News Agency dispatch dated 5 December 1979, the weekly magazine *Akhir Sa'ah* [*The last Hour*] reported from Cairo, quoting Palestinian sources, that the recent sudden visit of Yasir Arafat, to Baghdad stopped an "Iraqi military operation aimed at invading and forcibly occupying three islands in the Gulf which Iran is now occupying." The magazine said that the PLO representative in Tehran had told Arafat that Iraq was likely to invade the three islands. (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 6 December 1979)

Other sources credited Western intelligence services with uncovering and foiling the plot with a view to avoiding the spread of the conflict and deflecting the threat against the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. Based on these sources, it was reported from Washington on 3 October 1980 that diplomatic pressure by the United States, Britain and some Persian Gulf countries had prevented the use of Omani territory by Iraqi planes and troops for attacks against the islands of Abu





Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. Intelligence reports were said to have been received on 28 September indicating that Iraq had sent troop-carrying helicopters and planes to Oman and had been asking the Omanis for permission to use their territory to carry out the assault. It was feared that an Iraqi attack would widen the war by provoking retaliatory Iranian action against Oman as well as against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and might result in the closing of the Strait of Hormuz to oil shipments. (Facts on File World News Digest, 10 October 1980)

According to Dilip Hiro, “When British intelligence in Oman discovered that Iraq had assembled helicopters and troops in Oman to carry out the plan, the British and American governments pressured the Omani Ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, to scuttle the Iraqi plan. Later, Saudi Arabia persuaded Iraq to abandon the idea of retaking the islands in the Gulf.” (Hiro 1991, 77-8) The action taken by the Western governments, and supported by the Saudis, if accurate, seems to have aimed at keeping the war localized, maintaining the flow of oil through the strait and preventing the conflict from affecting the whole Persian Gulf, including by putting navigation through the Strait of Hormuz in jeopardy. John Duke Anthony, too, refers to “Western diplomatic intervention during the early stage of the war” resulting in “Iraq’s curtailing its earlier intentions to wrest control from Iran of the three disputed islands.” (Anthony 1975, 106)

According to Anthony H. Cordesman, the start of the Iran–Iraq War “was accompanied by the covert efforts of several of the southern Gulf States to use the Iraqi attack to



reclaim the 'Tunbs and Abu Musa." (Cordesman 1984, 61) Elsewhere in the same book, Cordesman says that the new situation "led Bahrain, the UAE, and Oman to initially support Iraq's plan to attack the Iranian-held Tunbs and Abu Musa islands." (Ibid., 397)

### 7. Reviving the issue at the United Nations

Sadoon Hammadi, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iraq, in a letter dated 29 April 1980 to the UN Secretary-General, stated that "[t]he Government of the Republic of Iraq would like to emphasize its non-recognition of Iran's illegal occupation of the three Arab islands (Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa) and the consequences that may ensue from such occupation, and demands the immediate withdrawal of Iran from those islands." In the first paragraph of the letter, the Iraqi official refers to a statement made in an interview by the Iranian president, A. H. Bani Sadr, in which he said that "Iran would not forgo or restore the three Arab islands and that Arab states (Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Oman, Dubai, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) are not independent States." (UN Doc. S/13918 of 30 April 1980)

It is important to note that, after the letter of 17 July 1972 (S/10740) by the representatives of several Arab governments about the three islands, this was the first statement about the islands circulated as a document of the Security Council. It is important as well to note that in this letter the islands are twice referred to as 'the three Arab islands' and no mention of any



particular title-holder is made. Reacting to the Iranian foreign minister's response to the letter from Iraq's foreign minister, the permanent representative of Iraq wrote another letter, dated 19 August 1980 and addressed to the UN Secretary-General, in which he indulged in legal argument in a bid to prove the 'Arab' title to the three islands. (UN Doc. S/ 14117 of 21 August 1980)

The UAE did not initiate this episode but was coerced into it by pressure tactics employed by a rising Iraq. The UAE officials addressed two formal letters to the UN Secretary-General regarding the islands in reaction to the exchange of letters between Iran and Iraq through the Secretary-General, laying claim to the islands. (UN Doc. S/14111 of 18 August 1980 and UN Doc. S/ 14290, of 9 December 1980)

Iraq also raised the issue of the three islands during the general debate in the UN General Assembly on 3 October 1980. Referring to the two letters discussed above, Foreign Minister Sadoon Hammadi of Iraq said in his statement:

“If the ruling authorities in Iran do not really intend to expand at the expense of Arab national interests and if they honestly stand for the defense of those interests against the Zionist enemy, then we are entitled to wonder about the reasons for their retention of the three Arab islands, Abu Moussa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb, which Iran occupied in the time of the Shah.” (UN General Assembly, A/35/PV.1-33 of 10 September –10 October 1980)

Reference in Iraq's statement to the issue of the three islands contrasted with the statement of the UAE in the same general debate during the same session of the UN General Assembly, which made no reference to this issue. (Ibid.)

It is interesting to note that the same Iraqi foreign minister did not mention the three islands in the general debate of the UN General Assembly in 1981, which can be understood and explained in terms of the state of the war; Iraq's war efforts were floundering at the time. He did come close, however, to the issue and accused "the successive regimes of the Persian state" of having "pursued a policy of expansion . . . particularly in the Arab Gulf region," but he did not refer specifically to the three islands. (UN General Assembly, A/36/PV.1-33 of 25 September 1981)

In general, during the first phase of the war, when the Iraqi army was on the offensive, Iraq held to its conditions for ending the fighting, which, as a spokesman for the Iraqi government said on 23 September 1981, included the return to Iraq of the three islands. He pointed out that the three islands "which were occupied by Iranian troops nine years ago – must be turned over to Iraq." (Kifner, New York Times, 24 September 1980)

## **8. Shelving the issue**

When the first phase of the war, in which the Iraqi army was on the offensive, came to an end and Iraq began retreating on all fronts, Iraqi officials chose to abandon every reference to the three islands altogether. In fact, they gave up on all



preconditions for ending the fighting, including that relating to the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which they had set out in 1980–81. In fact, the early period in the war was the last period in which Iraq raised the issue of the three islands. Saddam Hossein, who had on numerous occasions previously during the early stages of the war pronounced himself on the three islands, did not allude – even implicitly – to this issue in his extensive letter addressed to the Iranian president on 14 August 1990, in which he signaled Iraq’s readiness to negotiate a border and territorial settlement with Iran on the basis of the 1975 Treaty.

During the years 1979 and 1980 when Baghdad aggressively pursued the issue, Iraqi officials were clear on one point: the three islands did not belong to Iran. However, the question as to whom they did belong was left ambiguous. At a news conference in September 1980, the Iraqi defense minister said that what he referred to as ‘the Arab islands’, near the entrance to the Persian Gulf, were seized by the Shah in 1971. “Before that time and throughout history, the inhabitants were Arab and they fell within the Arab region,” he said. “Iraq is quite clear who they belong to.” (Kifner, New York Times, 24 September 1980) As the preceding references demonstrate, Iraq never claimed the three islands for the UAE. The Iraqi media, as referred to earlier – and also later - were also ambiguous as to whom the three islands belonged. They usually demanded the return of the islands to ‘their legitimate owners.’ The scheme to attack and seize the islands – discussed earlier - is also important in this context. It would be difficult to assume that Saddam Hussein intended to seize the islands and hand them over to the UAE.

This ambiguity gave rise to speculations as to the real intentions of Baghdad. Some observers did not rule out the possibility that Baghdad was contemplating to bring the three islands under its direct control in a quest towards imposing its leadership over the Persian Gulf as a prelude to fulfilling its dream of assuming the leadership of the Arab world. With this in mind, John Kifner of the *New York Times* wrote:

“It would be shortsighted to treat the war as a limited crisis. Iraq’s proclaimed intention to liberate the strategically situated islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs is dangerously ambiguous. Iraq has no legitimate or historical claim to them. . . . Iraq either intends to take the islands as spoils of war or restore them to their former owners . . . . Either step would dramatically demonstrate Iraq’s domination of the Gulf and provide a pretext for Iraq to establish itself as guardian of the strait.” (Kifner, *New York Times*, 24 September 1980)

### **Conclusion**

Iraq spent a great deal of political capital in the early 1970s to turn the issue of the three islands into a hot spot in the Iran-Arab relationship. It did whatever in its power to keep it on the regional agenda in the course of the two decades that followed. The importance the then Iraqi government attached to this issue did not lie in the merit of the issue itself, but in its usefulness for advancing the pan-Arab grand strategy that sought to present "the Persians" as enemy against which the Arab world must



mobilize. It meant also to help the Iraqi central Government to neutralize and discipline the rather Iraqi centrifugal communities, as the Iraqi Shi'ites and Kurds have traditionally enjoyed deeply-rooted affinities with Iran. The ups and downs in the three islands politics and the periods of activity and dormancy it experienced up to 1992 attests to the fact that it was regarded as a means to help further Iraqi politics throughout the region and particularly in the Persian Gulf.

However, Iraq's attempts to seize the three islands or even put the issue on the agenda of regional actors failed to succeed. Arab politics and the schism in the ranks of the Arab governments was one of the factors that contributed to the Iraqi failure in this area. The support of Arab moderates for imperial Iran before the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and Arab radicals' support for Islamic Iran thereafter did not allow Iraq to bring its policy to fruition. However, the UAE's reluctance to pursue the issue for more than two decades was the more important factor in the politics of the three islands.

The Iraqi efforts to keep up and fuel the controversy over the three islands came to an abrupt end in 1991, following its grand folly and ultimate crashing defeat in the Kuwait war. The developments that preceded and followed this seminal event allowed for the emergence of a new situation in the Persian Gulf similar to that prevailing under the British colonial rule: the US established its full military presence and influence, including through acquiring full base rights. Under the new situation, the US, the only remaining global power, took the mantle of directly encountering Iran as the regional major power. As was the case

under the British colonial rule (Ahmadi, 2008, 205-09), the small Arab Sheikhdoms seem to have felt encouraged enough to making moves with regard to the islands; trying to recover the initiative from Iraq. That development allowed the controversy over the three islands to enter a new phase as from 1992 – an episode with enduring impact and implications for Iran-Arab relations to date.



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