

## DETECTING IRAN, 1968–71

---

### The Royal Navy, Iran, and the Disputed Persian Gulf Islands

*Richard Mobley*

**B**etween 1968 and 1971, Whitehall assigned the Royal Navy an unusual mission—to defend a series of disputed Persian Gulf islands while the United Kingdom was selling arms to and conducting naval exercises with Iran, the very country that threatened to invade them. The ownership of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb—three islands astride the western approaches to the Strait of Hormuz—was as controversial in the late 1960s as it is today.<sup>1</sup> The current controversy has its roots in complicated historical claims and the way Great Britain defended, and ultimately negotiated a handoff of, the three islands. Today it is possible to gain a far more refined understanding of Britain’s naval and diplomatic strategy for protecting and then disposing of the contested islands. Hundreds of formerly secret British military and diplomatic documents have been declassified and released on the subject since 1999. They are a rich resource for understanding the controversies associated with British naval planning to defend the islands and London’s undertakings to its former charges when it finally withdrew from the Gulf in 1971.

*Richard Mobley, a retired naval intelligence officer, was assigned to the Defense Intelligence Liaison Office in London between 1998 and 2001. A graduate of the National War College and Georgetown University (M.A., history), he completed a series of overseas assignments in the Middle East and Asia. He was assigned to the staff of Commander, Middle East Force, and also made several Mediterranean and Indian Ocean deployments. Since his retirement from the Navy, he has served as an intelligence analyst for the U.S. government.*

#### BACKDROP

Tehran and London had long disputed ownership of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb. For over a century, Britain had engaged in “indirect rule” of the Arab states abutting the Gulf. Under treaties signed with tribal leaders, the United Kingdom would handle defense and foreign policy but leave domestic affairs to the emirs themselves. By 1970, the defense policy

# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE <b>2003</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2003 to 00-00-2003</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Deterring Iran, 1968-71: The Royal Navy, Iran, and the Disputed Persian Gulf Islands</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Naval War College, 686 Cushing Road, Newport, RI, 02841-1207</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

required a commitment of forces to defend such Gulf client states as Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States. The United Kingdom prepared contingency plans (such as HELIX, or Reinforced Theatre Plan [Gulf] No. 1) to protect such states against their neighbors—Iraq, Iran, and each other). The plans required a relatively small presence of British air, naval, and ground forces, which were based primarily in Bahrain and Sharjah (now one of the emirates of the United Arab Emirates). The long-standing plans relied on timely alertment, rapid implementation, and speedy reinforcements from outside the Gulf.<sup>2</sup>

All such contingency plans became harder to implement in January 1968, when Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that Britain would withdraw from its defense commitments east of Suez. Its defense obligations and military presence in the Gulf were to cease by December 1971. The key players on the military side, notably the Chiefs of Staff Committee and Commander, British Forces Gulf, accordingly began planning for a “run-down” of British forces. This task was particularly challenging because Britain remained obligated to defend the Gulf client states until the withdrawal was complete, no matter how much the British overseas force structure had shrunk at any given time—and, as the table shows, the withdrawal from the Gulf was to occur rapidly.

#### PLANNED 1971 DRAWDOWN

Platform	May	October
Minesweeper	4	-
Frigate	1	1 (48-hour notice)
LSL	1	1
LCT	1	1
Hunter (fighter)	23	9
Shackleton (patrol)	5	2

Source: CBF, “Military Action to Counter Arab Guerilla Occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands” (Annex B), 30 March 1971 (DEFE 28/576).

However, the Royal Navy also relied on a naval “covering force” from the Far East. As of September 1971, an attack carrier would be able to respond to Gulf contingencies within two weeks. In November 1971, an attack carrier was scheduled to be able to respond within five days; a helicopter assault ship (LPH) could enter the Gulf within eight days.<sup>3</sup>

While in the process of withdrawing, the United Kingdom would also continue to craft foreign policy on behalf of its clients.

Unfortunately, anticipating the imminent departure, Iran, ruled by Shah Reza Pahlavi, began immediately more forcefully asserting its long-standing claim to Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb. Tehran claimed legal ownership of the islands and declared a desire to ensure stability of the Gulf (and protect sea lines of communication through the Strait of Hormuz) by occupying them. In response, the United Kingdom, on behalf of the emirates of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, asserted that all three islands were Arab territory. London explicitly backed Sharjah’s claim to Abu Musa and Ras Al Khaimah’s claim to the Tunbs. With its security obligations scheduled to lapse by the end of 1971, however, Great Britain attempted to resolve the islands dispute, while fostering the creation of the new United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>4</sup>

The British were well aware of the conflicting interests involved in the southern Persian Gulf. The Foreign Office repeatedly described the high stakes inherent in the British intermediating position. On one hand were large British arms sales to Iran, Iranian support for maintaining regional stability via the Central Treaty Organization, and Tehran's acquiescence to Bahraini independence and, in late 1971, the founding of the United Arab Emirates. On the other side of the ledger was London's desire to retain influence in the Arab world and foster stability in the Persian Gulf even after Britain's military withdrawal from the region.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, Britain crafted a military strategy designed to straddle the fence. Commander, British Forces Gulf (CBFG) would monitor Iranian approaches to the islands and intensify air and naval patrols should the shah seem too interested in them. Beyond such posturing, the extent to which Britain should go to defend the islands was controversial. Faced with debates within Whitehall and between London and its representatives in the field, the United Kingdom crafted a compromise, top secret plan designed to bluff any Iranian invading force away from Abu Musa (Great Britain considered the Tunbs indefensible)—that is, to deter Iran without alienating it. A second plan was formulated to retake the islands (and thereby forestall an Iranian invasion) should they be seized by Arab guerillas.

Britain's different approach to the three islands was based in part on geography. Abu Musa is closer to Arab shores (lying south of a notional median line that the United Kingdom was arguing could be used to divide the Gulf) and more salient to Arab clients; the Tunbs were closer to Iran. Abu Musa was larger than the other two islands, and oil and gas reserves were suspected to lie about six miles to the southeast. From an Arab perspective, the Tunbs had little to offer.

The Tunbs are seventeen miles southwest of Iran's Qeshm Island and forty-six miles northwest of the nearest point on the UAE coastline. Greater Tunb is roughly 2.5 miles in diameter and had at the time a population of approximately 150 Arabs. Lesser Tunb is eight miles to the southwest; it was barren, waterless, and uninhabited. Neither had airstrips, jetties, or fuel supplies.<sup>6</sup> The shah, however, had long focused his attention on the Tunbs, and in the late 1960s he began to press his claim to Abu Musa with equal vigor. Abu Musa is approximately three square miles, with an estimated eight hundred inhabitants in 1971. Abu Musa suffered from the same lack of militarily useful facilities as did the Tunbs.<sup>7</sup>

#### PENSUM

When Prime Minister Wilson announced the end of British treaty commitments east of the Suez Canal (a position that Edward Heath's Conservatives would sustain when they assumed power in 1970), the shah became more vocal about Iranian claims to the islands. He argued that only Iran could now ensure safety and stability in the Gulf, including freedom of shipping through the Strait of

Hormuz, and that to do so Iranian forces would have to garrison the islands.<sup>8</sup> London worried that Iran might seize the islands even before Britain left the Gulf. In January 1968, the United Kingdom did not even have a contingency plan to defend the islands and lacked basic knowledge about beaches it might have to assault. This would change when the Imperial Iranian Navy began operating close to the Tunbs.<sup>9</sup>



The first “mini-crisis” started on 12 January 1968, when a photo-reconnaissance Royal Air Force (RAF) Canberra sighted and photographed the Iranian frigate *Bayandor* anchored approximately one mile east of the Tunbs. (Commander, British Forces Gulf routinely reconnoitered the disputed islands and monitored southern Gulf waters to prevent illegal immigration and arms smuggling into the Trucial States.)<sup>10</sup> An RAF Shackleton, a propeller-driven maritime patrol aircraft, quickly corroborated the sighting. Fearing that Iran would occupy Tunb, CBFG prepared to deploy elements of the Trucial Oman Scouts to defend it—if Iranian troops were not already there. The scouts were put on four-hour alert. However, when London’s emissary to the Trucial States arrived on the island from Dubai the next day, *Bayandor*

was gone. Instead of garrisoning any of the islands, CBFG settled for continued aerial surveillance of the surrounding waters.<sup>11</sup>

The Royal Air Force’s interest in Iranian shipping near the Tunbs provoked an Iranian warning. *Bayandor* had manned and trained its guns on the Shackleton that overflew it near the Tunbs on 12 January.<sup>12</sup> Great Britain and Iran both protested the incident. The United Kingdom declared that it was “deeply disturbed” that the Iranian navy had violated the territorial waters of the Tunbs (i.e., those of Ras Al Khaimah).<sup>13</sup> Iran for its part protested repeated “harassing flights” over an Iranian naval vessel operating in “Iran’s coastal waters.”<sup>14</sup> An Iranian diplomatic note warned that such surveillance was “unfriendly” and that if the flights continued the Iranian ship would “take such action as considered necessary in accordance with international law.”<sup>15</sup>

A month went by before the next development in this crisis, when British maritime patrol aircraft flew repeated surveillance passes near the Iranian naval auxiliary *Tahmadou* in the southern gulf. Admiral Rasa’i, commander of the Iranian navy, complained to Commander, British Forces Gulf that a large RAF

aircraft (presumably a Shackleton) had repeatedly overflown *Tahmadou* as it operated near the Tunbs. He asked for an explanation for the incidents, which might be “misinterpreted” in Tehran. When debriefed, the Shackleton crew explained that it had initially approached the vessel about midday on 22 February, no closer than 440 yards, at an altitude of four hundred feet. Recognizing it to be a naval auxiliary, the Shackleton stood off. The two subsequent passes had approached no closer than a mile away. Rasa’i accepted the explanation but asked that British patrol aircraft stand off at least three miles from Iranian warships unless they had prior permission to approach closer.<sup>16</sup>

On the British side, the seeming Iranian threat to the Tunbs sparked an internal debate about how to defend the islands. A dialogue between Sir Stewart Crawford, the political resident (the senior diplomatic official in the theater, responsible for orchestrating British foreign policy in the Gulf), and Frank Brenchley and M. Weir, in the Foreign Office Eastern Department, framed the argument. Crawford, with the agreement of CBF, concluded that the best way to defend the islands against Iran was by stationing troops on them. He wanted at least to erect a radio transmitter on Greater Tunb to speed the flow of information from this remote island. The Foreign Office Eastern Department countered that a confrontation might escalate and “seriously endanger our considerable interests in Iran, commercial (including oil) and military (overflying).” (The best way for the United Kingdom to support its forces in the Far East entailed flying through Iranian airspace.)<sup>17</sup> The Foreign Office held that garrisoning the islands would be too provocative. Indeed, the Eastern Department considered relations with Iran so important that it questioned whether Great Britain should resort to *any* kind of military force to protect the islands. If Iran invaded the islands, Weir’s version of “defense” was merely to lodge a diplomatic protest in the United Nations and perhaps suspend arms deliveries to Iran: “I should find it difficult to approve a recommendation to put troops on the islands even if an Iranian move appeared imminent.”<sup>18</sup>

The political resident, in response, cited Britain’s repeated pronouncements that it would defend the Trucial States. What would London say if one of the trucial sheikhs asked for British reassurance as an Iranian threat developed? “Either the Minister of State and the Prime Minister meant what they said in stating that so long as we had the capability we should continue to honour our obligations, or they did not.”<sup>19</sup>

A second mini-crisis, however, seems to have forced the United Kingdom to begin planning to defend the islands militarily. On 29 March 1968, the Foreign Office received a report (from uncited sources) that Iran might try to seize the Tunbs over the next two days. Abandoning the Eastern Department’s earlier passivity, the Foreign Office requested immediate Royal Navy patrols off the

disputed islands. CBFG consequently ordered two minesweepers to make a daylight transit past the northern side of Tunb Island on 30 March. Either the assault ship HMS *Intrepid* or the frigate HMS *Tartar*, or both, would also steam by the islands on the thirty-first, while Shackletons reconnoitered the area. (Ironically, *Intrepid* had just been conducting assault landings with the Iranians.) None of these units were to do anything other than report back to Whitehall if Iran invaded the islands. After the transits, the Defence Ministry warned the theater commander that the “situation . . . is still very delicate and all provocative action is to be avoided.” Iran never attempted to occupy the islands during this episode.<sup>20</sup>

Using the just-ended crisis as a scene-setter, Sir Stewart made his case for a formal plan to defend the island. He argued that the shah remained a threat to the islands despite diplomatic warnings and air and naval patrols. The United Kingdom could defend the islands by preemptively landing troops before the Iranians could arrive. He reasoned that Iran might attempt to seize the Tunbs first, given their relative proximity to Iran and perceived strategic importance to the shah. If Iran took the Tunbs, Crawford believed, CBFG should land on Abu Musa before the Iranians could arrive there as well.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, in April the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence directed the preparation of a contingency plan for British troops to occupy Abu Musa should Iran threaten or occupy the Tunbs. The Foreign Office explained its change of heart to the defense minister. It admitted that the United Kingdom had previously ruled out landing on the islands to deter an Iranian assault. Now, however, it argued, a British failure to take more than diplomatic action would “rally Arab opinion against us, again with severe damage to our interests, including difficulties over the military withdrawal from the Gulf.”<sup>22</sup> However, Whitehall continued to foreclose the obvious solution of simply stationing a permanent garrison on the islands, because such a move would provoke Iran. Moreover, a British garrison would have to be withdrawn when Great Britain left the Gulf, whereas a garrison manned by Trucial Oman Scouts could simply be overrun once the United Kingdom departed.

From this debate emerged PENSUM, the United Kingdom’s primary plan to deter Iran from invading any of the disputed islands; it remained effective from spring 1969 until the United Kingdom withdrew from the Gulf in December 1971. It called for a military bluff—a show of force in which British units would be prohibited from actually attacking Iranian invaders. To deter Iran from seizing the Tunbs, CBFG would merely increase sea and air patrols around them. A Royal Navy frigate or minesweeper could be on station as well with twenty-four hours’ notification. The British combatant would advise Iranian ships approaching to within three miles of the island (and apparently intending to land

troops) that they were within Ras al Khaimah's territorial waters. The Royal Navy would formally protest the landing, but its warship on the scene would not attempt to prevent it. Neither would British troops land on either island, under any circumstances.<sup>23</sup>

As for Abu Musa, CBFG would also increase patrol activity. If the Iranians seized the Tunbs, two Wessex helicopters could transport a platoon of up to thirty-two people from Sharjah to Abu Musa—provided the Iranian army had not already arrived there. (If CBFG belatedly discovered an Iranian military presence on Abu Musa, the British assault platoon would turn around and helicopter back to base.) The remainder of an infantry company (presumably the platoon's parent company) could reinforce the platoon. Assuming the British military got to the island first, the British commander would warn the Iranian commander that Abu Musa was Arab territory under the protection of the United Kingdom and that his force was not to land. If the Iranians landed anyway, the British platoon was to “endeavor to restrict their further movement from the point of disembarkation without using force.” In no case were British military units to attack Iranian forces, whether or not they overran Abu Musa, except in self-defense or to defend the lives of island inhabitants.<sup>24</sup>

#### BUDLET/ACCOLL

Great Britain never had to implement PENSUM. However, the Royal Navy soon found itself in the middle of a battle among three emirates, two international oil companies, and Iran. This third mini-crisis began in the spring of 1970, when the rulers of the emirates of Umm al Qaywayn and Ajman permitted the Occidental Petroleum Corporation to start exploratory drilling 6.5 miles southeast of Abu Musa. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to any of the participants, Sharjah had extended its claimed territorial limit around Abu Musa from three to twelve miles in September 1969, and it had awarded a drilling concession of its own for the same area, to the Buttes Oil and Gas Corporation.<sup>25</sup>

Word of the conflicting drilling leases and territorial claims spread, and Iran entered the act. The Iranian foreign minister warned that his nation's warships would prevent Occidental from drilling in the disputed zone. Nevertheless, the firm's drilling operation moved toward Abu Musa late in May 1970. Occidental initially advised that drilling would not start before 1 June. Meanwhile, RAF Hunters (fighters) deployed to nearby Sharjah, and Shackletons flying daily surveillance missions searched for Occidental's derrick barges, survey vessels, and tugs, as well as for Iranian warships that might be en route to the contested drilling zone. The Royal Navy committed four minesweepers to the operation.<sup>26</sup>

The United Kingdom was determined to prevent a maritime blowup. To stop Occidental from drilling, the Foreign Office used diplomatic pressure but also

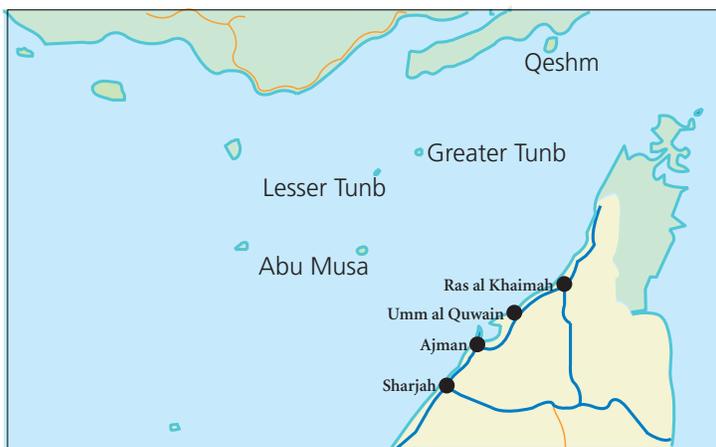
requested CBFG to stand by to tow away the drilling platforms and take other actions to prevent drilling operations. Royal Navy units were to “obstruct” the drilling platforms if they attempted to work in the disputed areas. Royal Marines embarked aboard the minesweeper HMS *Gavinton* to board the barges should Occidental insist on drilling despite British warnings. The political agent in Dubai warned Occidental on 31 May that drilling would violate an edict of the ruler of Umm al Qaywayn. Next day, the Royal Navy warned Occidental that it was not to begin drilling in the disputed area for at least three months. After two days of intense diplomacy, Occidental agreed. On 3 June, its drilling barge departed for Khafji, Saudi Arabia.<sup>27</sup>

Commander, British Forces Gulf considered the outcome favorable. The British ships and aircraft had “exerted a stabilising influence” by demonstrating London’s intention and ability to prevent drilling operations (and discourage “precipitate” Iranian naval action). Occidental, however, was less impressed and initiated legal action against the Royal Navy and other elements of the British government. The firm claimed that the United Kingdom had illegally hindered its operation and in the process damaged a drilling rig.<sup>28</sup>

Eight months later, the shah intensified pressure on London and its client states. In February 1971 he gave a public interview echoing what he had said privately—Iran would simply seize the three islands if a diplomatic solution was not forthcoming. Iranian naval activity buttressed his warnings. Iranian warships thrice violated the territorial limits of the Tunbs that month. In a fourth

instance, an Iranian vessel put a landing party onto Greater Tunb Island.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next month, London concluded that the risk of Iranian invasion of the islands before the final British departure had grown. The Chief of Defence Staff reminded his staff as well as senior service leaders that the Joint Intelligence Committee had recently concluded that



“there [were] substantial reasons” why Iran might invade the islands before the British withdrawal.<sup>30</sup> In particular, he and the Foreign Office worried that Iran’s increased pressure over the Tunbs might produce an unconventional response from radical Arab states (such as Iraq) or a state-sponsored guerilla group. The diplomats specifically feared that to preempt an Iranian invasion, an Arab guerilla

force of perhaps fifty men landing from dhows might seize one or all of the islands. Iran might respond by invading the islands, potentially while they remained under British protection. The Foreign Office confirmed to the military that Iran should understand “that our protection of the disputed islands is not merely nominal, but will be real and effective up to the date of our departure.”<sup>31</sup> Whitehall thus wanted to be able to block seizure of the islands by unconventional warfare forces—either Arab or Iranian.

Accordingly, the Defence Ministry in March 1971 directed that the theater commander prepare a new plan.<sup>32</sup> Commander, British Forces Gulf quickly realized that information on landing beaches on the Tunbs was lacking. On the night of 13 April 1971, the minesweeper *Puncheston* conducted a clandestine beach survey.<sup>33</sup> With the intelligence the ship collected, CBFG completed a contingency plan known as BUDLET/ACCOLL in May. BUDLET addressed the prevention of a landing of up to fifty guerillas on all three of the islands. If the guerillas succeeded anyway, British forces were to “evict” them under subplan ACCOLL. In this event the Royal Navy would blockade the islands and warn the intruders to surrender or to leave the islands. If the warnings were unheeded, helicopters and ships would deploy a squadron of the Trucial Oman Scouts to the islands. Hunter aircraft would provide close air support. Unlike in PENSUM, British forces were not restricted by ACCOLL from engaging the enemy.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, the Foreign Office felt that the United Kingdom might choose not to implement the plan even if guerillas invaded the islands. Rather, the Foreign Office opined hopefully, an Arab guerilla invasion might provide an opportunity for Iran and the emirates to cooperate in evicting the insurgents.<sup>35</sup> It concluded in a memorandum for the record that “political considerations” might “militate as strongly against preemption as they do against garrisoning of the islands.”<sup>36</sup>

The real purpose of the plan, of course, was to convince the shah that he did not need to invade the islands while the British were defending them. In May 1971, the ink barely dry on BUDLET/ACCOLL, Sir William Luce of the Foreign Office flew to Tehran to pursue further negotiations and to reassure the shah that the United Kingdom now had contingency plans to defend the islands.<sup>37</sup>

By 15 November, after energetic negotiation by Sir William, Iran and Sharjah had reached “virtual agreement” on Abu Musa. Iran and Sharjah would occupy separate parts of the island; there would be a twelve-mile territorial limit around Abu Musa, and the inhabitants could fish in both countries’ zones. Sharjah would designate a company to exploit the oil resources off Abu Musa; Iran and Sharjah would split the revenues. In a separate agreement, Iran would provide aid to Sharjah for nine years. A memorandum of understanding

from Sharjah to the United Kingdom (and agreed to by Iran on 25 November 1971) summarized all this.

Luce foresaw that with the agreement signed with Abu Musa and with Ras al Kaimah's refusal to cede the Tunbs to Iran under any circumstances, Iran would simply station forces on all three islands a day or so before the agreement was announced—most likely between 30 November and 3 December 1971.<sup>38</sup> In fact, they landed on the thirtieth. Sharjah sent a representative to greet the Iranian troops. However, the Iranians encountered token resistance when they landed on the Tunbs, with the result that four Iranians and Arabs were killed.<sup>39</sup>

#### “REASONABLE HOPES FOR STABILITY”?

The residual military presence in the Gulf and the flurry of contingency planning between 1968 and 1971 doubtless afforded some reassurance in Whitehall as Britain pursued a diplomatic resolution of the islands dispute. However, to maintain the status quo Great Britain ruled out what it knew to be the most directly effective means of protecting them—establishing garrisons. PENSUM could well have backfired; from the tone of his statements, it is hard to believe that the shah would have backed down once having decided to invade Abu Musa. The image of a British platoon begging the shah's troops not to land on Abu Musa is not an attractive one. Would the posturing envisioned in PENSUM really have been better than doing nothing?

BUDLET/ACCOLL at least reflected a coherent strategy and a reasonable matching of means (the residual British force in the Gulf) and ends (removal of a small guerilla band). The Chiefs of Staff Committee believed the operation could be completed within a month. Rapid and effective action might have forestalled an Iranian invasion.

At the end of the day, the cabinet viewed the episode as a success story. In December 1971 Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the foreign minister, told the cabinet that “there were [now] reasonable hopes for stability in the Gulf area, an outcome for which our emissary, Sir William Luce, deserved warm congratulations.”<sup>40</sup>

The conspicuous Royal Navy and Air Force presence had supplemented British diplomacy in deterring Iran. Iran ultimately invaded the islands, but on the last day of British protectorate; it had not humiliated the United Kingdom by doing so months earlier, when the islands had been manifestly under British protection. (Presumably Tehran was concerned to allow responsibility for the “loss” of the islands to fall on London rather than on the emirates themselves—which accordingly were not honor bound to seek reprisals or reverse the situation.)

Today, despite the Royal Navy's efforts in 1971, the status of the islands remains controversial. In 2003 testimony before the International Court of Justice, the United States accused Iran of using Abu Musa as a base for helicopter and

Boghammar speedboat attacks against commercial shipping during the “tanker war” of the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> In 1992, the United Arab Emirates accused Iran of violating understandings reached when Sharjah allowed Iranian forces onto Abu Musa (Ras Al Khaimah, now part of the UAE, never accepted Iranian occupation of the Tunbs). Specifically, the UAE protested Iran’s attempts to limit access to Abu Musa, and Iran evidently became concerned that the UAE might even invade the islands (with outside assistance). Indeed, when the United States surged forces into the Gulf in response to renewed Iraqi threats to Kuwait in the fall of 1994, Iran reportedly increased its defenses on Abu Musa.<sup>42</sup> Tehran’s hold on these islands is likely to remain a sensitive point as the United States occasionally “surges” naval forces into the Gulf, as well as intensifies its rhetoric, in its campaign against the “axis of evil.”

---

#### NOTES

1. See Hooshang Amirahmadi, ed., *Small Islands, Big Politics: The Tunbs and Abu Musa in the Gulf* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), for a current anthology on the disputed islands.
2. Chiefs of Staff Committee, “Reinforcement of British Forces Gulf from 1 November 1970 until Completion of Withdrawal,” 15 October 1970 (DEFE 5/187). [All British documents cited in this essay are stored in the Public Record Office in Kew Gardens.] Commander British Forces Gulf (CBFG) prepared HELIX to reinforce the Gulf between 1 November 1970 and withdrawal. The plan would have reinforced CBFG with two infantry units, an armored vehicle squadron, and a light artillery battery. Initial units would arrive in Bahrain or Sharjah within seventy hours of the execute order.
3. *Ibid.* In fact, the final withdrawal of British forces from the Gulf in December 1971 relied upon a flotilla (carrier included) that entered the Gulf.
4. Amirahmadi, pp. 10–11, 52–56.
5. Diplomatic report, “Britain, Iran and ‘The Islands’: The Carrot and the Stick,” 9 September 1971 (DEFE 28/576); Air Commodore B. Stanbridge (Chiefs of Staff Committee), “The Gulf Islands Dispute and British Defence Interests in the Gulf Area in the Long Term,” 14 September 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
6. Foreign Office [hereafter FO] memorandum, “Islands and the Median Line in the Persian Gulf,” n.d. (FCO 8/56); “Gulf Islands Claimed by Iran,” 4 August 1971 (DEFE 28/576); CBFG, “Measures to Counter an External Arab Threat to Occupy Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands Illegally,” 30 March 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
7. FO memorandum, “Islands and the Median Line in the Persian Gulf,” n.d. (FCO 8/56); CBFG, “Measures to Counter an External Arab Threat to Occupy Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands Illegally,” 30 March 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
8. FO memorandum, “Islands and the Median Line in the Persian Gulf,” n.d. (FCO 8/56).
9. Bahrain to FO, 5 April 1968 (DEFE 25/265); “Measures to Counter an External Arab Threat.”
10. Bahrain to FO, “Tunbs,” 3 February 1968 (FCO 8/54); U.K. embassy Tehran to FO, “Disputed Islands,” 27 February 1968 (FCO 8/55).
11. CBFG messages date-time group 121050Z January 1968, 121430Z January 1968, 121800Z January 1968, 130900Z January 1968; all in FCO 8/54.
12. CBFG message date-time group 121800Z January 1968 (FCO 8/54).

13. FO memorandum, "Record of a Meeting between the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and the Iranian Ambassador," 15 January 1968 (FCO 8/54).
14. FO to Tehran, 26 January 1968 (FCO 8/54).
15. Diplomatic note from Iranian embassy to foreign minister, 15 January 1968 (FCO 8/54).
16. "Disputed Islands"; Bahrain to FO, no subject, 2 March 1968 (FCO 8/55); FO to U.K. embassy Tehran, "Tahmadou," 4 March 1968 (FCO 8/55); U.K. embassy Tehran to FO, "Tahmadou," 6 March 1968 (FCO 8/55).
17. FO to Bahrain, 14 February 1968 (DEFE 11/549).
18. *Ibid.*; M. Weir, memorandum, "Iranian Claim to the Tunb Islands and Abu Musa Island," 9 February 1968 (FCO 8/55).
19. S. Crawford (Political Representative Persian Gulf), letter to F. Brenchley (FO), "The Tunbs and Abu Musa," 24 February 1968 (FCO 8/55).
20. Ministry of Defence [hereafter MoD] message date-time group 291730Z March 1968 (DEFE 11/549); briefing paper for meeting of the Defence Operations Executive scheduled for 29 March 1968 (DEFE 25/265); MoD message date-time group 011149Z April 1969, no subject (FCO 8/56).
21. Bahrain to FO, 5 April 1968 (DEFE 25/265).
22. M. Stewart, FO, memorandum to Secretary of State for Defence, "Disputed Islands in the Persian Gulf," 11 April 1968 (FCO 8/56).
23. CBF, "Deterrence of Iranian Action against Abu Musa and Tunb" (Joint Theatre Plan [Gulf] No. 1), 23 April 1969 (DEFE 11/681).
24. *Ibid.*
25. N. Barrington, FCO, to P. Moon (Prime Minister's Office), 28 May 1970 (DEFE 25/244); FCO background note on Abu Musa/Iran dispute, 28 May 1970 (DEFE 25/244); CBF, letter to Secretary to Chiefs of Staff Committee, "The Abu Musa Incident," 13 June 1970 (DEFE 28/576).
26. "The Abu Musa Incident"; CBF message date-time group 280831Z May 1970, no subject (DEFE 25/244).
27. *Ibid.*; CBF message date-time group 010745Z June 1970, "Abu Musa Sitrep No. 3" (DEFE 25/244).
28. "The Abu Musa Incident"; summons from London High Court to MoD, 1 June 1970 (DEFE 28/576); A. M. Warner, DS5, memorandum, "Abu Musa," 14 January 1971 (DEFE 28/576); FCO, message, "Offshore Boundaries in the Trucial States," 26 August 1970 (DEFE 28/576).
29. R. Tesh, FCO, letter to Commodore Bayne, Chiefs of Staff Committee, "Threat to the Disputed Persian Gulf Islands," 11 March 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
30. Chief Defence Staff, letter, "Abu Musa and the Tunbs Islands," 19 March 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
31. "Threat to the Disputed Persian Gulf Islands."
32. MoD message date-time group 181730Z March 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
33. Bahrain Residency message date-time group 160915Z April 1969 (DEFE 28/576); "Measures to Counter an External Arab Threat."
34. Defence Operational Planning Staff, "Military Action to Counter an Arab Guerilla Threat to the Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs," 10 May 1971 (DEFE 28/576).
35. FCO to ACDS (Ops) Staff, 3 May 1971 (DEFE28/576).
36. R. Tesh, FCO, to Air Commodore Stanbridge, Chiefs of Staff Committee, 17 May 1971 (FCO 28/576).
37. Air Commodore Standridge, Chiefs of Staff Committee, memorandum, "Military Action to Counter an Arab Guerilla Threat to the Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs," 11 May 1971 (DEFE 28/576); Chiefs of Staff Committee, memorandum, "Military Action to Counter an Arab Guerilla Threat to the Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs," 11 May 1971 (DEFE 4/257/2).
38. American embassy Tehran message date-time group 150803Z November 1971, NSC files, box 602, Nixon Collection, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
39. Amirahmadi, pp. 10–11, 56, 162–67; American embassy Tehran message date-time group 150803Z November 1971; FO to Bahrain, 14 February 1968 (DEFE 11/549).
40. Cabinet meeting minutes, 2 December 1971 (CAB 128/49/61).

41. U.S. submission to International Court of Justice, 21 February 2003, available at [www.icj-cij.com](http://www.icj-cij.com) [accessed 28 February 2003].
42. In March 1995, the Defense Department announced that Iran had increased its military presence on the islands from a few hundred to over a thousand troops. It had also emplaced a Hawk surface-to-air missile battery, some artillery, and ten older tanks. See Kenneth Bacon's press conference of 2 March 1995, available at [www.defenselink.mil](http://www.defenselink.mil).