The Islands of Arabia: Their Recent History and Strategic Importance

J.E. Peterson

The periphery of the Arabian Peninsula, 'the island of the Arabs', is dotted with a multitude of islands, islets, rocks and shoals. Only a few of these are inhabited and fewer still exhibit any significant size or noticeable variations in topography and vegetation. Some of these islands from time to time have generated interest because of their location, occupation by outside powers and/or disputed status between both indigenous and European states. This article seeks to provide a brief survey, in easy reference form, of the more important of Arabia's islands, with emphasis on the background to recent disputes and current status.

It should be obvious, of course, that this survey does not discuss, nor even attempt to identify, all the islands of the Red Sea or Persian (Arabian) Gulf. The most notable omission is that of the Bahrain Islands: full and adequate treatment of this archipelago and independent state is beyond the scope of a single article, as the growing body of literature on Bahrain indicates.[1] In general, these notes are concerned only with islands over which there has been – or still is – some dispute, or which have been at the centre of recent attention. The survey presented in the following pages has been compiled from numerous scraps of information scattered throughout a wide variety of published materials and in various British archival holdings.[2]

Red Sea[3]

Farasān (16.45N 42.00E)[4]

A small archipelago, the Farasān Islands are located off Saudi Arabia's 'Asīr coast, nearly opposite the port of Jīzān. Prior to the First World War, sovereignty was held by the Ottoman Empire, which had permitted the brief establishment of a German coaling station at the turn of the century and then some exploration for oil a decade later. The Ottomans abandoned the islands early in the war and British forces temporarily occupied them in December 1916 and January 1917, chiefly to forestall any Italian claims. The claim of the then independent Idrīsī *amīr* of 'Asīr to this archipelago was clearly recognized by the British authorities, despite their rather high-handed action in raising the British flag there without prior consultation with the *amīr*.

Formal recognition of Idrīsī sovereignty was subsequently acknowledged in a supplementary agreement to the Anglo-Idrīsī treaty and British troops were withdrawn.

This was, as it turned out, only a temporary solution, as control of the Farasāns passed to Saudi Arabia, along with the absorption of the remainder of the Idrīsī amirate into that country in the 1920s. Lingering British concern over their status, however, continued until the Second World War as a result of Italian interest in the Red Sea region. Thus, the islands were specifically cited in the Rome Understanding of 1927 and by implication in the 1938 Anglo-Italian Agreement. Inconclusive oil exploration was undertaken at various times by British concerns.

Kamarān (15.21N 42.34E)[5]

An island of 22 square miles with a small population of fishermen, Kamarān is almost a peninsula off the North Yemen coast near al-Ḥudaydah. Because of its strategic location, it has been used at various times as a base for military operations against the Yemeni littoral. In the last few centuries, this has included the Mamlūks, the Portuguese, Muḥammad 'Alī of Egypt, the Zaydī *imāms* of the Yemen and the Wahhābī *sharīfs* of Abū 'Arīsh. In the nineteenth century, both the French and British expressed interest in Kamarān as a means of controlling the southern Red Sea but following reassertion of Ottoman sovereignty, the only European connection came with the establishment of a telegraph station there about 1860.

A quarantine station for Muslim pilgrims on the *ḥajj* to Mecca was established in 1882, which subsequently handled as many as 44,000 pilgrims a season. Kamarān figured as a minor theatre of operations in the 1911-1912 Turco-Italian war and passed from Ottoman control in 1915. British occupation at that time was undertaken less because the island was Ottoman territory than because of the perceived need to forestall any move there by Britain's ally, Italy. The RAF marked out a landing ground on the island in 1919. The quarantine station was reopened under British supervision that same year despite the island's indeterminate status: Turkish rights were renounced by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and an international conference to determine the sovereignty of Kamarān and other Red Sea islands never convened. Consequently, Britain administered the quarantine station on behalf of all the governments whose pilgrims used it.

The island was administered for the Government of India by the Resident of Aden, who appointed a resident Civil Administrator. This official also served as director of the quarantine station and was assisted by two medical officers appointed by the Government of India and the Government of the Dutch East Indies, according to a 1926 Anglo-Dutch Agreement. The island's status, and attempts to avoid Italian suspicions of British militarization, meant that only police recruited from Aden and the Protectorate could be used on Kamarān. In the early part of Second World War, the island served as a British refuelling base during the Italian East Africa campaign. The war of course interrupted the *ḥajj* but Kamarān station was reopened in 1944, despite India's feeling that the quarantine services were

no longer necessary. Indian independence meant that jurisdiction was transferred from the Government of India to the Colonial Office in 1949.[6] In practical terms, the only difference was a change of the Civil Administrator's title to Commissioner, but he was still appointed by the Governor of Aden even though Kamarān was not included in the Aden Colony or Protectorate. British control continued, in spite of Yemeni claims, even after the quarantine station was closed following the opening of a station at Jidda.[7] A correspondent for *The Times* reported in 1961 that the island held an impoverished population of about 1200. In November 1967, Kamarān was turned over to the newly-independent People's Republic of Southern Yemen, as the result of a referendum conducted on the island. Finally, it was captured by Yemen Arab Republic troops in October 1972 during the war between North and South Yemen.[8]

Perim (Barīm or Mayūn) (12.40N 43.24E)[9]

Commanding the Bāb al-Mandab strait at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, Perim Island lies approximately 1½ miles off the Arabian shore and 11 miles from Africa. Its strategic location has made it an object of interest for centuries and it was first occupied, though only briefly, by the British in 1799 at the time of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. Permanent British occupation took place in 1857, once again to forestall French advances anticipated with the opening of the Suez Canal, and a lighthouse was established at this time. It was noted a few years later that the island was a pearl fishing centre, and thus provided a considerable share of Aden's exports. By 1883, the Perim Coal Company had established a coaling station on the island, and gradually came to provide formidable competition for the Port of Aden. Consequently, and despite a brief fear of Ottoman attack in 1914, Perim entered an era of relative prosperity. By the 1920s, the island had acquired a greater share of the bunkering market than Aden and the coal company's manager was named Government Agent in 1929, replacing an Assistant to the British Resident of Aden.

But the growing depression and a shift to fuel oil eventually led to a collapse of Perim's fortunes. The Perim Coal Company terminated its lease in 1935 and vacated the island, causing both the Cable and Wireless and the Asiatic Petroleum operations to follow suit. The Government of Aden thereupon faced direct responsibility for providing water and other services and had to appoint a new government official.[10]

As Perim was technically part of the Aden Settlement (which became Aden Colony in 1937), Aden's Commissioner of Police was appointed Administrator of Perim and thereafter regularly visited the island, which was left under the day-to-day supervision of an Arab agent. Apart from the occasional bombing raid by the Italians during the Second World War, the island slumbered in isolation. A Governor of Aden in the early 1960s wrote that activities on the island had been reduced to the two lighthouses, a water-condensing plant and a depressed fishing village.

With Aden's independence in late 1967, Perim became part of the new South Yemen republic along with the other islands of Kamarān and Socotra.

Subsequently, as a result of the new regime's radical, pan-Arab orientation, Perim Island began to resurface in the news. In 1971, an attack by Palestinian guerrillas on an Israeli tanker was allegedly launched from Perim and the island was used by Egypt during the October 1973 War to blockade the Bāb al-Mandab strait against Israel. More recently, there have been occasional reports of Soviet facilities on the island but, as in the case of Socotra (discussed below), these have not been verified.

Other Red Sea Islands[11]

A number of other islands now under the sovereignty of the YAR, were also the focus of attention during the Anglo-Italian rivalry in the Red Sea. From north to south, these included Jabal al-Ṭayr (north-west of Kamarān, 15.35N 41.52E), the Zubayr group (15.00N 42.10E), Zuqar (14.00N 42.45E). the Ḥanīsh group (13.45N 42.45E), and Abū 'Alī (north of Assab, Eritrea, 14.05N 42.50E). During 1901-1902, a private French concern built and later maintained lighthouses on Jabal al-Ṭayr, Centre Peak (in the Zubayr group) and Abū 'Alī, under a concession from the Ottoman government. In 1915, British forces occupied these islands and took over maintenance of the lighthouses. Zuqar and Ḥanīsh al-Kabīr were also temporarily occupied at this time in order to forestall Italian claims. Since the legal status of all these islands, like Kamarān, had been left indeterminate by the Treaty of Lausanne, both Britain and Italy were barred from claiming them and continued to harbour suspicions of each other's intentions. The 1927 Rome Understanding included an agreement by both powers to maintain the international status of all the islands.

A 1930 convention between Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Japan, to regularize maintenance of the lighthouses by turning them over to a French company, proved abortive when it was not ratified. Subsequent British abandonment of the Centre Peak light (to bring pressure on France to ratify the covenant) resulted in Italian occupation of the island and construction of another lighthouse. Because of the Italian argument that the light was necessary to protect shipping, and that their presence no more prejudiced the international status of Centre Peak than the British presence on Kamarān, the British were forced to acquiesce in this move. They were similarly constrained when Italy opened another lighthouse in the Ḥanīsh group and placed small garrisons on Ḥanīsh al-Kabīr and Zuqar, ostensibly to protect fishing interests in the area. The Italian presence continued until the Second World War after which the British continued to supervise the lights.

Note may also be made of the small and uninhabited islands of Tīrān (27.56N 34.34E) and Ṣanāfīr (27.55N 34.42E), at the mouth of the Gulf of 'Aqabah, at the northern end of the Red Sea.[12] Although the islands legally belong to Saudi Arabia, they were occupied by Egypt in 1950 because of their strategic location. Israel captured Tīrān Island in the 1956 Arab-Israeli War but subsequently withdrew. Israeli forces reoccupied the island as a result of the 1967 war and reopened the strait to its shipping. The Israelis again left Tīrān in April 1982 in line with their withdrawal from Sinai.

Persian (Arabian) Gulf[13]

Warbah and Būbiyān (29.30N 48.05E and 29.80N 48.20E)[14]

These two uninhabited islands at the extreme northeastern corner of Kuwait have long been claimed by Iraq because of their strategic location on the southern shore of the Khawr 'Abd Allāh. This channel, lying between Kuwait and Iraq, provides the only access to the Iraqi port of Umm Qaṣr, built to alleviate Iraqi dependence on the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab which it shares with Iran. Kuwaiti claims to the islands of Warbah and Būbiyān were disputed by the Ottoman empire early in the twentieth century, which apparently envisaged the area as a railway terminus, but Kuwait's ownership was recognized through the Anglo-Turkish Agreement of 1913, the Kuwaiti shaykhdom by then falling under British protected status. Subsequent Iraqi claims to the islands were partly subsumed under the larger scope of claims to sovereignty over all of Kuwait but also received particular emphasis because of Baghdad's desire for an alternative outlet to the Gulf. In the late 1930's, Iraq expressed interest in building a port at Kuwait town but was discouraged by the British who instead suggested the potential of Khawr 'Abd Allāh and even provided a survey of the Umm Qaṣr site, which confirmed its suitability.

While Baghdad seemed well disposed to the idea, its insistence on control over Warbah and Būbiyān was emphatically rejected by the Kuwaiti ruler. Actual construction of a port at Umm Qaṣr only came about as a result of British military needs during the Second World War and it was always fully under British control. Since there was considerable uncertainty whether the site was in Iraqi or Kuwaiti territory or both, the port was dismantled at the end of the war without consulting either country. The idea of an Iraqi port at Umm Qaṣr remained alive, however, with discussions held as early as 1949 between the Baghdad government and Iraq Petroleum Company on the possibility of an oil terminus there. Once again, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry pressed claims for both islands; but the British, acting on Kuwait's behalf, were prepared only to cede a small amount of territory in the immediate environs of Umm Qaṣr and to agree to the rights of ships of all nations to free passage through Khawr 'Abd Allāh.

The subsequent construction of a commercial port and then naval facilities at Umm Qaṣr served to intensify Iraqi pressure on Kuwait. Despite Kuwait's attainment of full independence in 1961, Iraq did not renounce its claims to the shaykhdom until 1963. The delineation of boundaries between the two countries, however, continues to be a thorny issue. Kuwait had little choice but to acquiesce in an Iraqi military encroachment on Kuwaiti mainland territory in 1969, justified by Baghdad by its need to protect Umm Qaṣr fully because of the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab dispute with Iran. A border incident in 1973, which resulted in several deaths, and Iraqi-Iranian agreement over the Shaṭṭ in 1975 renewed Kuwaiti attempts to gain Iraq's withdrawal, along with continued affirmation of its sovereignty over Warbah and Būbiyān. While Baghdad eventually agreed to remove its troops from Kuwait territory, its only concession on the islands was to suggest a long-term lease for Warbah and northern Būbiyān; this proposal has been rejected by Kuwait.

al-'Arabiyyah and Farsī (27.41N 50.20E and 27.58N 50.11E)[15]

These two small and uninhabited islands, located directly in the centre of the northern half of the Gulf, were long of undetermined and even unclaimed ownership until the question was raised in protracted correspondence among various agencies of the British government. From 1929 to 1938, intermittent discussion between the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, the India Office, the Foreign Office, the Admiralty, and even the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, wrestled with the potential claims of Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to these islands, and what each might mean for British access to any potential oil deposits, as well as for the possible importance of the islands in air and sea navigation. At one point, the Foreign Office put forth a suggestion for annexation but this was rejected on the grounds that it might provoke littoral states to raise conflicting claims to other Gulf islands, as well as encourage Italian claims in the Red Sea.

Finally, after having created 'a tempest in a teapot', and after having ascertained through local inquiries that probable ownership lay with Kuwait, it was decided to drop the entire matter in hopes of avoiding any provocation of ownership claims. The erection of a beacon light on Farsī by the Kuwait Oil Company in the mid-1940s, however, prompted a Saudi protest and the advancement of their own claims, which were subsequently followed by a similar move on the part of Iran. Saudi and Iranian claims to both islands were finally resolved by their agreement in 1965 on Saudi ownership of al-'Arabiyyah and Iranian ownership of Farsī. This settlement was incorporated into the two countries' 1968 delineation of their continental shelf boundary.

Qārū and Umm al-Marādim (28.49N 48.54E and 28.41N 48.39E)[16]

Another pair of small and uninhabited islands has long been disputed between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Qārū and Umm al-Marādim lie offshore of the former Kuwaiti/Saudi Neutral Zone. When the two states agreed to divide the Zone in 1965, the question of sovereignty over these islands was left for later settlement. Kuwait's position has been that these islands were never part of the Neutral Zone and have always belonged to Kuwait. Thus, an oil concession covering the territorial waters of these and another Kuwaiti island (Kubbar) was granted in 1949 to a subsidiary of Aminoil, although no activity took place until a survey was carried out in 1962. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, considered them to be part of the Neutral Zone and thus subject to the same status as the Zone's onshore territory. Even though the islands have been nominally administered by Kuwait, Saudi claims have been maintained. There were reports of an armed Saudi occupation of the islands in the summer of 1977, although some agreement appeared to have been reached in December 1978 on partitioning this offshore area.

Ḥawār (25.40N 50.46E)[17]

A group of 16 islands lying close to the western coast of the Qaṭar Peninsula, the Ḥawār Islands have been claimed by both Qaṭar and Bahrain, with the latter intermittently maintaining a police post on the main island. The dispute between the two countries arose in the 1930s over the question of oil and whether the islands fell under Bahrain Petroleum Company's concession or that of Petroleum Concessions Ltd. in Qaṭar. The issue came to a head in 1936 when the ruler of Bahrain established a small military post there, in turn provoking the Qaṭarī ruler to lodge a complaint with the Political Agent in Bahrain.

As a result, both rulers were invited to present evidence of their claims to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf who would make judgement. Here the ruler of Bahrain was at a clear advantage, having not only established a *prima facie* claim by his erection of a fort on the main island but also by having an English Personal Advisor to prepare a sophisticated case for presentation to the British Resident. The Qaṭarī ruler's common-sense argument that the Ḥawārs were Qaṭarī because they had always been Qaṭarī was no match for Bahrain's presentation and consequently the Resident awarded the islands to the latter state in 1939.[18] Qaṭar continued to dispute this decision, however, and its demand for restoration of the islands resulted in a deadlock in 1967 negotiations over the countries' offshore boundaries. The dispute surfaced again in 1976 when both Foreign Ministers reiterated their states' claims, and in 1978 when Qaṭar detained some Bahraini fishermen following Bahraini military manoeuvres near the islands.

Further controversy arose in early 1983 when Qaṭar protested Bahrain's actions in naming a new warship *Ḥawār* and carrying out naval exercises near the islands; the disputants subsequently agreed to 'freeze' their differences at a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting and accept Saudi mediation.

Abū Mūsā and the Ṭunbs (25.52N 55.01E and 26.15N 55.17E)[19]

The islands of Abū Mūsā, Greater Ṭunb, Lesser Ṭunb and Ṣirrī are strategically located in the middle of the Gulf near its only entrance at the Strait of Hormuz. Ownership of Abū Mūsā and Greater Ṭunb has been a long-running dispute between Persia/Iran and the Qawāsim family of the Trucial Coast for over a century.[20] The Qawāsim had assumed possession of the islands by the middle of the nineteenth century and their ownership was later recognized by the British. Nevertheless, Persia continued to advance its claims and introduced customs officials on the islands in 1904, withdrawing them only after a British protest. Several years later, Abū Mūsā nearly became the centre of a diplomatic incident when the British forcibly removed workers for a German firm mining iron oxide there. The British erection of a lighthouse on Greater Ṭunb in 1913 was a further indication of their acceptance of the Arab claim. By 1921, a split within the Qawāsim was formalized by British acceptance of the independence of Ra's al-Khaymah; thereafter, Abū Mūsā was regarded as Sharjah's territory while Ṭunb was suspected to be a base for smuggling goods into Iran. In 1928, Persian

customs officials seized an Arab dhow at Ṭunb and the contentious issue of ownership was revived. Despite achievement that same year of a verbal agreement between the British and Teheran to recognize the *status quo* of Persian sovereignty over Ṣirrī and Arab ownership of the other islands, Persia soon reiterated its claims. A suggestion to drop the claim on Abū Mūsā in return for Ra's al-Khaymah's giving up of Ṭunb was not well received, as the Ra's al-Khaymah ruler saw little incentive to enter into a deal which would benefit only Sharjah. A subsequent proposal for a Persian lease of Ṭunb was stoutly resisted by the Ra's al-Khaymah, and further negotiations during that decade produced no results.

The issue remained dormant until the 1960s when Teheran's interest was revivified by such factors as the possibility of oil, increasing awareness of the islands' defensive potential in preventing the closure of the Gulf to shipping and the spectre of a political vacuum raised by the British announcement in 1968 of their impending withdrawal from the Gulf.[21] Early in 1970, Iran once again raised its claim to ownership of all the islands, warning Britain to stop oil exploration near Abū Mūsā and threatening to use force to regain the islands if necessary. As the date for Britain's withdrawal drew near, Iranian statements became more insistent. A British envoy was dispatched to Teheran in mid-November 1971 and subsequent negotiations produced an agreement between the Shah and the ruler of Sharjah for sharing Abū Mūsā.
On November 30, two days before official British withdrawal from the Gulf and proclamation of the independent United Arab Emirates, Iranian troops occupied Abū Mūsā in line with this agreement. At the same time, a landing party put ashore on the Ṭunbs met resistance from a small Ra's al-Khaymah police detachment and Iranian control was secured only after considerable bloodshed. This act raised a storm of protest throughout the Arab world (with some criticism of Britain for allowing it to happen) and the issue was brought before the U.N. Security Council. Nevertheless, the islands remained under the Iranian flag. A decade later, the new Islamic Republic of Iran reiterated that country's sovereignty over the islands and later Iraq evidently sought to encourage pan-Arab support for its efforts in the war with Iran by announcing its intention – apparently never acted upon – to restore the islands to Arab ownership.

Other Gulf Islands

Brief mention might also be made of Musandam Island and the three-island group of the Quoins (in Arabic, Salāmah wa-Banātu-hā, Salāmah and her [Two] Daughters) (14.05N 42.49E), which lie off the mountainous Omani enclave of Ru'ūs al-Jibāl and the Musandam Peninsula, directly in the Strait of Hormuz. Formerly, the shipping channels in and out of the Gulf, with their steady stream of oil-tanker traffic, lay between Musandam and the Quoins. However, the Omani government moved the channels farther out into the Strait and beyond the islands at the beginning of the 1980s, ostensibly because of the dangers of oil pollution.

Just off the west or Gulf shore of the Musandam Peninsula lies the small island of al-Ghanam (26.21N 56.22E), used as a base and for recreational

purposes by the Royal Navy for much of this century. During the Dhufar rebellion in the early 1970s, it was rumoured that Oman had allowed Iran to use the island for its patrols in the Strait of Hormuz. The Omani navy later made permanent use of facilities there.

Arabian Sea

al-Maṣīrah (20.30N 58.50E)[22]

A low barren island some forty miles in length and lying not far off Oman's Arabian Sea coast, al-Maṣīrah's small indigenous population traditionally lived by fishing and exporting dried shark fins. Principally of the Janabah tribe, the inhabitants gained some notoriety in 1904 when the crew of a British vessel shipwrecked on the island was attacked. Following this incident, however, little outside notice was taken of al-Maṣīrah until 1932 when an oil depot was established and a landing ground marked out for use on the RAF's Basra/Aden air route. Al-Maṣīrah's strategic importance later became apparent with the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1939, the British reached agreement with the Sultan of Muscat and Oman for enhanced use of facilities there, both as a stop on the South Arabian Air Route (an alternative communications and matériel-ferrying route from Africa to India and the Far East) and as a base for anti-U-boat operations. Additional rights for American use were secured in 1942. The war transformed the island into a beehive of activity; a 1942 report mentioned the presence of 150 Indian Army sappers, 40 Pathan guards, a Baluch company of RAF Levies, several BOAC personnel, USAF Ferry Command representatives, several American civilians engaged in drilling for water, and 500 coolies, in addition to a squadron of RAF landplanes and frequent use by RAF flying boats. As a consequence of a labour dispute, the shaykh of al-Maṣīrah had been ordered off the island by the Sultan and most of the inhabitants were reported to have fled.

Its strategic location prompted the British government in 1944 to contemplate securing a more permanent basis of control. Outright purchase was proposed, as was an exchange for the Khūriyā Mūriyā Islands (see below); the latter suggestion was scotched by the Colonial Office which felt that it would set a bad precedent for other British possessions. In the end, the British settled for a long-term lease. With the end of the war, use of al-Maṣīrah decreased dramatically. By 1947, the airfield was kept open only on a 'care and maintenance' basis with about 18 personnel, including an RAF officer and a small force of Aden Protectorate Levies. For the next several years, only occasional commercial charter flights made use of the airfield, while Britain's post-war budgetary cutbacks prompted debate in London over whether or not al-Maṣīrah should be abandoned.

Events in the 1950s, however, served to increase the island's value, as reaction to the British role in the Suez War, the loss of RAF bases in Iraq after the 1958 revolution and the general emergence of independent and anti-imperialist states greatly reduced the number of available military sites. In the following decade, al-Maṣīrah played a significant role along with the RAF

base at Ṣalālah in Britain's East of Suez chain of RAF staging posts. The bases at al-Maṣīrah and Ṣalālah survived the gradual relinquishment of East of Suez facilities, the loss of Aden with South Yemen's independence in 1967 and British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, only because of their role in assisting Omani forces in putting down the longstanding rebellion by nationalist and the Marxist forces in Dhufar.

After the fighting there ended in late 1975, the rationale for maintaining al-Maṣīrah diminished and in mid-1976 the British announced that their RAF base would be turned over to the Sultanate of Oman Air Force the following year. In connection with American assumption of the British defence umbrella for the Gulf, the US requested permission for occasional use of al-Maṣīrah facilities as early as January 1975, when Sulṭān Qābūs visited Washington.

Following the Iranian revolution and Soviet actions in Afghanistan, an agreement was signed in June 1980, giving the newly-created U.S. Rapid Deployment Force access to facilities on al-Maṣīrah and elsewhere in Oman. In addition to runway improvements and fuel storage, the US used al-Maṣīrah for transferring mail and passengers to its ships operating in the Indian Ocean and for air surveillance aircraft.

Khūriyā Mūriyā (17.29N 56.00E)[23]

Only al-Ḥallāniyah, the largest of these five rocky islands along the southern fringe of Oman, is inhabited and its population of less than one hundred speaks Shaḥrī (akin to Mahrī) and has close ties with the mainland Dhufari town of Mirbāṭ. The islands were presented by Oman's Sulṭān Sa'īd to Queen Victoria in 1854 and they remained in British hands for over a century. A licence was granted in 1856 to a private company to mine the guano deposits but operations ceased several years later. A telegraph station was established in 1859 but was soon abandoned when the cable linking Aden with India failed. Since direct British connection with the islands was thereafter minimal, the inhabitants continued to regard themselves as loyal to the Sultan of Oman. In 1931, administrative responsibility was transferred from the Aden Resident to the Persian Gulf Resident because of the island's proximity to the latter's jurisdiction and since potential use was envisioned by RAF units stationed in the Gulf. Legally, however, the Khūriyā Mūriyās remained Crown territory and thus were included in the Chief Commissioner's Province of Aden (later Aden Colony) and were never considered part of British India. With British withdrawal from Aden, the islands were transferred back to Oman on 30 November 1967, in accordance with the inhabitants' wishes. This move was bitterly opposed by the new South Yemeni government, which considered the islands to be part of its First Governorate and declared its right to regain control. Since then, however, the Khūriyā Mūriyās have remained Omani territory and basic improvements in the islanders' standard of living have been carried out as a part of the Dhufar development effort.

Socotra (Suquṭrā) (12.30N 54.00E)[24]

Socotra is the largest and best known of the islands surveyed in this article. About 70 miles long and 20 miles wide, it commands a strategic location between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden.[25] Many of its 10-15,000 inhabitants live in settlements along the northern coast, including the capital of Ḥadībū, and are of Arab or African origin and speak Arabic. The rugged, mountainous interior is home to Bedouin who live in caves, speak a Mahrī dialect and are probably the original inhabitants. Until South Yemen's independence in 1967, the island formed part of the Sultanate of Qishn and Socotra; while the capital was Qishn, on the Arabian mainland, recent Sultans made their residence on Socotra.

Remnants of Christianity were apparently retained on Socotra until the fifteenth century, and the island was captured in 1507 by the Portuguese who built a small fort and church. The British briefly occupied the island in 1835 and its location generated some interest with the opening of the Suez Canal, but Socotra did not formally fall under British influence until 1886 when a protectorate treaty was signed with the Mahrī Sultan. Thereafter, the island received several infrequent visits from British officials and the RAF marked out a landing ground in the late 1930s; this was destroyed when it appeared that Italy, with its nearby African bases, would enter the war. Later, the island was reoccupied by British, South African, Dutch and Canadian forces and used as a base for convoy escorts and anti-submarine patrols. With the end of the war, Socotra returned to its normal, isolated state, oblivious to its inclusion in 1950s and 1960s proposals for an RAF island staging scheme in the Indian Ocean. Along with Qishn, Socotra was included in the new South Yemeni state in 1967, and in subsequent years rumours emerged that it had become a Soviet base. A correspondent of *The Times* reported in 1971 (11 and 21 January) that there was no sign of Soviets and their presence would be unlikely in any case, given the island's lack of harbours, the shallowness of surrounding waters, unapproachability during the monsoon season (May to September) and absence of airfields save for the remnants of earlier British strips.

Notes

1 Recent studies of Bahrain include M.G. Rumaihi, *Bahrain: social and political change since the First World War*, London, 1976; Emile A. Nakhleh, *Bahrain: political development in a modernizing society* Lexington, 1976; and Fuad I. Khuri, *Tribe and state in Bahrain: the transformation of social and political authority in an Arab state*, Chicago, 1980. The account of Charles Belgrave, longtime Personal Adviser to the Ruler of Bahrain, has been published as *Personal column*, London, 1960.

2 These include the records of the Cabinet (CAB), the India Office (L/P&S), the Political Residency in the Persian Gulf (R/15), the Aden Residency (R/20), the Colonial Office (CO), the Foreign Office (FO) and the Air Ministry (AIR).

3 General sources on Red Sea Islands include Richard F. Nyrop *et al.*, *Area handbook for the Yemens*, Washington, 1977; United Kingdom, Admiralty, Naval Intelligence Division, *Western Arabia and the Red Sea*, Oxford, 1946; Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain, India and the Arabs, 1914-1921*, Berkeley, 1971; Eric Macro, *Yemen and the Western World since 1571*, London, 1968; Hamzah 'Alī Luqmān, *Tārīkh al-Ǧuzur al-Yamaniyyah*, Beirut, 1972?; and John Baldry, 'Anglo-Italian rivalry in Yemen and 'Asīr, 1900-1934,' *Die Welt des Islams*, Berlin, XVII, nos. 1-4, 1976, 155-193.

4 John Baldry, 'British naval operations against Turkish Yaman, 1914-1919,' *Arabica*, Leiden, fasc. 2, 1978, 183-185; *Idem*, 'The Powers and mineral concessions in the Idrīsī Imāmate of 'Asīr, 1910-1929,' *Arabian Studies*, II, 1975, 78-101; Busch, *Britain, India and the Arabs*, 238-241; Macro, *Yemen and the Western World*, 41, 71-72; J.E. Peterson, 'South-West Arabia and the British during World War I,' *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Villanova, Pa., II, no. 4, 1979, 34-35; CO/725/86; FO/371/19978 and 34910.

5 John Baldry, 'Foreign interventions and occupations of Kamarān Island,' *Arabian Studies*, IV, 1978, 89-111; Charles Johnston, *The View from Steamer Point*, London 1964, 32, 96-97; Luqmān, *Tārīkh al-Juzur al-Yamaniyyah*, 8-10; Macro, *Yemen and the Western World*, 25, 34, 41, 47-48, 124; V. Vaca, 'Kamarān,' *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (II), 519; *The Times*, 27 May 1961; CO/725/24, 86 and 92; FO/371/17805, 18920, 61436, 74972, and 82081; AIR/9/55; AIR/20/3883; AIR/24/2; CAB/21/1033.

6 Since Kamarān's sovereignty was still undetermined, approval of even this change was required from India, Pakistan and the Netherlands, because of the use made of the quarantine station by their pilgrims.

7 In the late 1940s, the British RAF and Chiefs of Staff Committee recommended retaining an ability to use the airfield on Kamarān, regardless of who held sovereignty, because of the island's strategic location in case of another war. Another British interest may have been due to the possibility of oil there: a concession was granted to D'Arcy Exploration Company, a subsidiary of British Petroleum, in 1956, although no discoveries were made.

8 John Baldry notes that South Yemeni nationalization measures on the island had so antagonized the inhabitants that they requested YAR occupation. 'Foreign interventions,' 106.

9 Mordechai Abir, *Oil, power and politics: conflict in Arabia, the Red Sea and the Gulf*, London, 1974, 137-140, 200-201; Busch, *Britain, India and the Arabs*, 221; R.J. Gavin, *Aden under British rule, 1839-1967*, London, 1975, 25, 95, 102-103, 180, 291-292; Johnston, *The View from Steamer Point*, 94-95; R.L. Playfair, *A History of Arabia Felix or Yemen*, Farnborough, 1970; reprint of 1859 Bombay edition, 16-18; CO/725/24, 30 and 34.

10 A report to the Government of India at the time noted that, apart from the coal company, the island had 30 armed and 21 unarmed police, a staff of about 50 employed at the two lighthouses, and a population of about 1500 at the village of Mayūn. There being no fresh water on the island, all water supplies were provided by the coal company's condenser. It was expected that about one-third of the population would leave as a result of the company's closure.

11 Baldry, 'Anglo-Italian rivalry,' 162; George Rendel, *The Sword and the olive: recollections of diplomacy and the foreign service, 1913-1954*, London, 1957, 136; CO/725/86 and 92; FO/371/19978, 34910 and 61436.

12 U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Indian Ocean Atlas*, Washington, 1976, 29; Majid Khadduri and Herbert Dixon, 'Passage through international waterways,' in Majid Khadduri, *ed.*, *Major Middle Eastern problems in international law*, Washington, 1972, 82.

13 General sources on Gulf islands include J.G. Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omān, and Central Arabia*, Farnborough, 1970; reprint of 1908-1915 Calcutta edition; United Kingdom Foreign Office, Historical section, *Persian Gulf*, London, 1919; Husain M. Albaharna, *The Arabian Gulf States: their legal and political status and their international problems*, Beirut, 1975; John Duke Anthony, with J.E. Peterson and Donald S. Abelson, *Historical and cultural dictionary of the Sultanate of Oman and the Amirates of Eastern Arabia*, Metuchen, N.J., 1976; Alvin J. Cottrell, *gen. ed.*, *The Persian Gulf States: a general survey*, Baltimore, 1980; and Charles G. McDonald, *Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the law of the sea: political interaction and legal development in the Persian Gulf*, Westport, Conn., 1980.

14 Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914*, Berkeley, 1967, 214-216 and 336-340; Majid Khadduri, *Socialist Iraq: a study in Iraqi politics since 1968*, Washington, 1978; L/P&S/12/3737; R/15/5/68 and 208-210.

15 Albaharna, *The Arabian Gulf States*, 310-311; R.M. Burrell, 'Britain, Iran and the Persian Gulf: some aspects of the situation in the 1920s and 1930s,' in Derek Hopwood, *ed.*, *The Arabian Peninsula: society and politics*, London, 1972, 181-183; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, *Limits in the seas*, no. 24, 'Continental Shelf Boundary, Iran-Saudi Arabia'; L/P&S/12/3863; R/15/2/546; FO/371/19979.

16 Albaharna, *The Arabian Gulf States*, 271-273 and 296-298.

17 *Ibid.*, 249 n3 and 302-303; Belgrave, *Personal column*, 157; McDonald, *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the law of the sea*, 35; Richard F. Nyrop *et al.*, *Area handbook for the Persian Gulf States*, Washington, 1977, 266; Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, London, 1979, 89-90; *Idem*, 'Hegemony, dependence and development in the Gulf, in Tim Niblock, *ed.*, *Social and economic development in the Arab Gulf*, London, 1980,71-72; L/P&S/12/3895.

18 It should be noted that the British desired a quick end to the dispute not only because of the question of oil but also due to the simultaneous, long-simmering dispute over Zubārah, a village on the north-western coast of Qaṭar but claimed by Bahrain as the Āl Khalīfah ruling family had originally emigrated to Bahrain from Zubārah. The next Political Resident sharply disagreed with the judgment and felt that the islands belonged to Qaṭar. At the same time, however, he reported that it was not practical politics to reverse the decision, a view seconded by the Government of India. Nevertheless, Bahrain Petroleum Company was advised to postpone operations around Ḥawār to avoid incensing the Qaṭarī ruler.

19 Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, *The United Arab Emirates: a modern history*, London, 1978, 233-246, 255-273 and 281-284; Albaharna, *The Arabian Gulf States*, 303-305, 339-348, and 399-400; Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, 356-357 and 369-372; Burrell, 'Britain, Iran and the Persian Gulf,' 171-179; Donald Hawley, *The Trucial States*, London, 1970, 162; Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates: a political and social history of the Trucial States*. London, 1978, 125-130 and 195-196; *The Times*, 1968-1981; L/P&S/10/1267; L/P&S/18/B.397 and B.399.

20 Probably due to its small size, Lesser Ṭunb was not actively contested, while Ṣirrī was permanently annexed by Persia in 1887.

21 Abū Mūsā's offshore area was included in the Mecom Oil Company's 1962 concession from Sharjah, although drilling was abandoned in 1967. Occidental Petroleum apparently had no more luck a few years later. Buttes Oil & Gas finally discovered oil in the early 1970s and later began production.

22 Phillip G.C. Darby, *British defence policy east of Suez, 1947-1968*, London, 1973; Gerald de Gaury, 'A Note on Masirah Island,' *Geographical Journal*, London, CXXIII, Pt. 4, 1957, 499-502; David Holden, *Farewell to Arabia*, London, 1966, 43; J.E. Peterson, *Oman in the twentieth century: political foundations of an emerging state*, London, 1978, 139; Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, *Flight from the Middle East*, London, 1980, 18; L/P&S/12/3928; R/15/6/81,87,89,92-93, 110 and 313; CO/725/86; FO/371/16848; AIR/20/7431 and 3883; AIR/28/1077.

23 Frank Clements, 'The Islands of Kuria Muria: a civil aid project in the Sultanate of Oman administered from Salalah, regional capital of Dhofar,' *British Society for Middle East studies bulletin*, London, IV, no. 1 1977, 37-39; Rupert Hay, 'The Kuria Muria Islands,' *Geographical Journal, London, CIX, 1947, 279-281; The Times*, 1967; L/P&S/12/2106; CO/725/38 and 46; FO/371/61426.

24 Brian Doe, *Southern Arabia*, London, 1971, 244-250; Douglas Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, London, 1958; Gavin, *Aden*, 28, 96 and 198; Johnston, *The View from Steamer Point*, 93-94; Luqmān, *Tārikh al-Juzur al-Yamaniyyah*, 36-84; Lee, *Flight from the Middle East*, 11, 12 and 15; CAB/80/36; R/20/B2A/380/39; R/20/B2A/455/40; AIR/2/4; AIR/20/7431; AIR/23/1151; AIR/24/2.

25 To the west of Socotra are the smaller and uninhabited islands of Samḥā and Darsā ('the Brothers') and 'Abd al-Kūrī.

ARABIAN STUDIES

VII

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