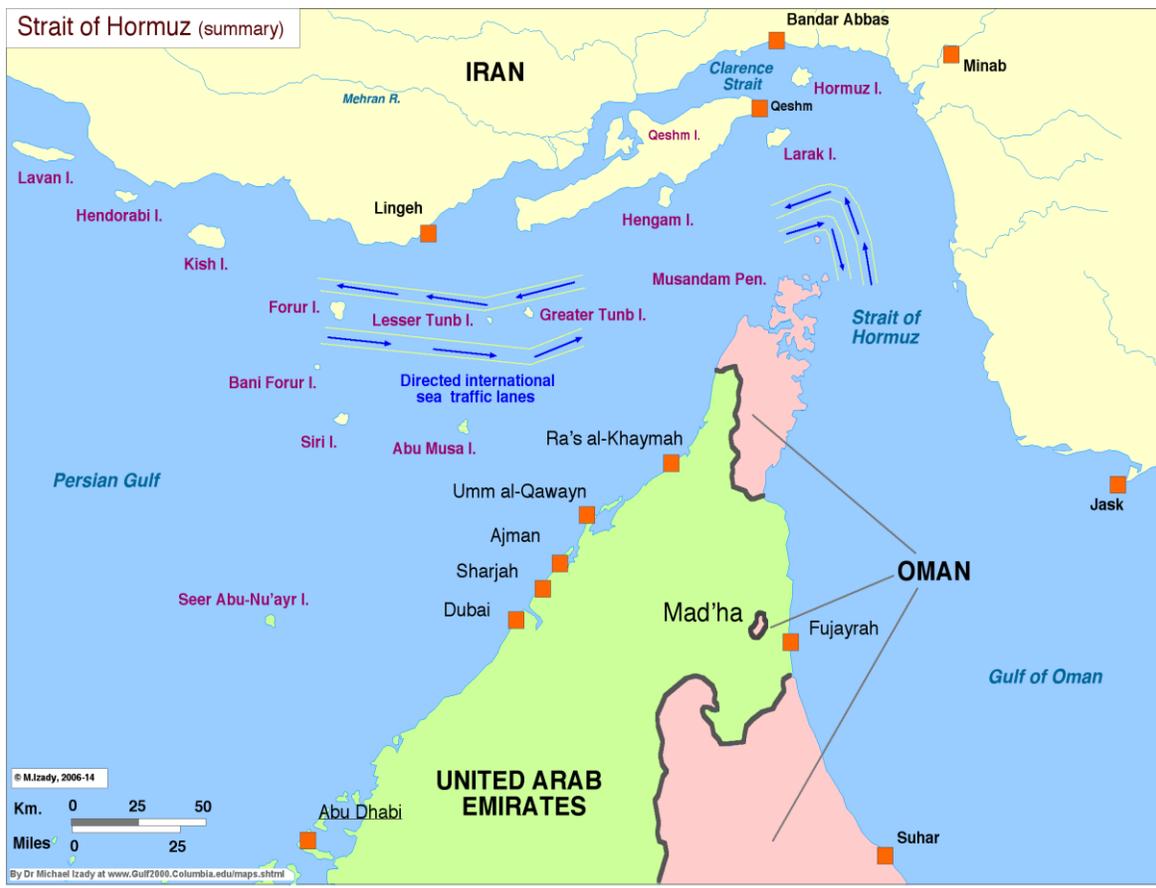


## **Iran's Diplomatic Initiatives: Maritime Dispute Settlement**

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In May 2015, Iran and Oman agreed to demarcate the undefined stretch of their maritime boundary in the Persian Gulf. Both countries have now demarcated a 450 kilometres section of their maritime boundary that had not been defined earlier. It was the first substantial progress on the issue since 1975, when Iran began its maritime boundary talks with Oman or with any of its neighbours. Although, the specifics have not been made public, it has been declared that the boundary dispute has now been resolved. In the context of this significant development, it is worth examining maritime dispute settlement as a new focus area for Iran's regional diplomacy.

Iran has many outstanding maritime boundary disputes with its neighbours, both in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. It has not settled any of its maritime disputes since the fall of Shah of Iran in 1979. In recent years, there has been a concerted effort by Iran to settle its maritime disputes with its neighbours, and this effort has gathered pace in recent times. According to news reports, Iran may settle its dispute in the Persian Gulf with United Arab Emirates (UAE) over its sovereignty over of three islands i.e. Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa. According to the proposed deal, "Iran will retain the sea-bed rights around the three islands while the UAE will hold sovereignty over the land," and "Oman will grant Iran (sovereignty over) a strategic location on Ras Musandam Mountain." The latter is strategically valuable since it overlooks the entire Persian Gulf region. In return, Oman will receive free gas and oil from Iran once a pipeline is constructed.



Map Source: <http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/hormuz.gif>

In the Caspian Sea, Iran has shown willingness to honour the Caspian Sea Convention being negotiated that will determine the legal rights of the littoral countries i.e. Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. The Caspian Sea legal regime is based on two agreements signed between Iran and the former Soviet Union in 1921 and 1940. However, the three successor states have not recognised the treaties entered by the Soviet Union, triggering a debate on the future status of the Caspian Sea and the need to have a new more acceptable framework to the rights of the Caspian littoral states.

Iran's latest diplomatic push for the resolution of its maritime disputes comes at a time when Iran is trying to regain its place in the international community as a responsible actor in West Asia. The dispute settlement by Iran also needs to be viewed in the context of Iran's case in P5+1 negotiations over its nuclear programme. It will also assuage the fears of the regional countries regarding Iran's regional ambitions. Iran's

involvement in the regional politics of West Asia has been an issue, with the fault-lines of this mutual mistrust embedded in history and culture. The significance of maritime dispute negotiations and agreements lies in the fact that it will lead to a better security environment in the Persian Gulf, which is the lifeline of global energy supply. It will also lead to better coordination among the littoral states of the Gulf, which will also help in avoiding incidents like firing at Singapore flagged vessel 'Alpine Eternity' in international waters close to the Strait of Hormuz.

The dispute settlement pertaining to the three disputed islands between Iran and UAE will lead to vigorous oil and gas exploration activity, which will be beneficial for all the stakeholders of the region as well as international customers. In the Caspian Sea region, all littoral states are resource-dependent economies. Considering this, a settlement of maritime dispute over legal claims of the littoral states would help them meet their economic needs by better exploration and utilisation of natural resources of the Caspian Sea. The location of Caspian Sea also offers major opportunities for the littoral states to supply oil and gas to Turkey and as far away as the European markets, which will result in huge benefits for the Caucasus region.

Lately, US-Iran rapprochement at the nuclear negotiations and the changing regional security environment involving the rise of ISIS and civil war in Syria have also encouraged Iran's liberal ideologue government to pursue a course-correction with respect to its neighbours as well as international stakeholders in the region. It seems that post the nuclear deal, the region will appear similar to what it looked like during the 1970's. As during that time Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia were major regional players. The relations among these players will be crucial in determining the security environment in West Asia. In such a scenario, Iran's initiatives to resolve the outstanding maritime boundary disputes is an encouraging step.

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