

## The UK Military in the Arabian Peninsula

Richard Reeve – March 2018

### Subject:

This primer explains what presence, relations and obligations the UK military has in the Arabian Peninsula, including the six monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Yemen, as well as the international waters of the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and Red Sea.

### Context:

Fifteen years on from the invasion of Iraq and three years after regional intervention in Yemen began, the UK maintains a significant military presence in all the Gulf States. Control of the trade and oil supply routes around the Persian Gulf and Red Sea is also hugely important in British maritime strategy, justifying a permanent naval presence there. In the current decade, the air war against Islamic State and a desire to boost arms sales, contain Iran and to support the future operation of British aircraft carriers has led to a significant enlargement of the British military footprint in the Arabian Peninsula and Arabian Sea. Given concerns about regional human rights violations and the use of British weapons and British military training and assistance in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, this presence has become increasingly controversial.

### Key points:

- The UK has informal defence commitments to at least five regional states but no binding defence obligations to them.
- The Gulf region has the largest concentration of British military forces outside of the UK, including about 20% of the operational Royal Navy and over 300 personnel embedded with local militaries.
- The British military presence is dynamic and has expanded since 2013 to include new naval bases in Bahrain and Oman, use of air bases in Dubai and Kuwait, a desert warfare training centre in Oman, and a planned joint fighter squadron in Qatar.
- Exports to the region are critical to UK military aerospace business models and likely to constitute over half of all British arms exports in coming years. Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar are the key markets.
- Saudi Arabia's conflicts with Iran, Yemen and Qatar have been major business opportunities for UK arms suppliers but pose risks of escalation and costly military interventions.
- There is obvious tension between what the National Security Capability Review calls the fundamental values of Global Britain - respect for human dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy and equality – and the UK's growing military presence in the Gulf States and involvement in the Yemen war.

## Does the UK have overseas territories in or around the Arabian Peninsula?

The UK was the major external power in the Arabian Peninsula from the second-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1971, when the last of the sheikhdoms or emirates under its control achieved formal independence. Of the region's seven current states, only Saudi Arabia was never a British colony or protectorate. Aden, the main port of Yemen, was the primary British colony in the region, being a vital staging post between the Suez Canal and India until 1967. Since 1971 there have been no British territories in Arabia. The nearest remaining British overseas territories are:

- the Sovereign Base Areas of Cyprus, including RAF Akrotiri and the army garrison and listening posts at Dhekelia, about 400 km north of the Suez Canal;
- the depopulated British Indian Ocean Territories, including the major US naval and air base at Diego Garcia, 3,100 km southeast of Oman.

These retain important roles in support of the UK and US military presence in the Persian Gulf and surrounding waters.

## What are the UK's defence commitments in the Arabian Peninsula?

The UK does not have any formal commitment to defend any countries in the Arabia region. While it has defence cooperation agreements with most of the states, it does not have any defence treaties that would bind it legally to military action in the event of a hostile third-party invading or attacking a regional ally.

This is anomalous given that the UK has a significant and open-ended military presence in at least five regional states and military personnel embedded with most local militaries. However, this does mirror the practice of the US, France and other external states militarily deployed in the region.

Historically, the only binding UK and US military alliances in the Gulf region were with Iraq (to 1958) and Iran within the anti-Soviet Central Treaty Organisation (1955-1979).

Since then there has instead been an assumed commitment that the UK (in coalition with the United States and others) would come to the support of Gulf States against aggression by Iran (the focus of British maritime operations since 1980) or Iraq (as it did in Kuwait under UN mandate in 1991). There is a less clear assumption that the UK would support Gulf regimes were they threatened by domestic rebellion. This was the case in Oman in the 1970s, when the UK mounted a significant counter-insurgency campaign in Dhofar.

Yemen is the regional exception and has not usually been considered a British-aligned state, other than in local responses to al-Qaida there.

NATO has had limited formal military engagement with some regional states through the **Istanbul Cooperation Initiative** (ICI). Launched in 2004, this has led to bilateral partnership agreements between NATO and Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) but is far from including them in collective defence guarantees.

Arguably, the most overt defence commitment the UK has made in the region is to the private sector, in terms of protecting British-flagged shipping, especially oil tankers, via the Royal Navy's Armilla Patrol, now called Operation Kipion. British oil and gas interests are extensive in all of the Gulf States.

## Does the UK maintain a standing military presence in the region?

In the Gulf States Britain has its largest permanent concentration of military forces anywhere outside of the UK. This is largely a presence of Naval Forces (Royal Navy, Royal Fleet Auxiliary and Royal Marines), although small elements of the Royal Air Force (RAF) are also deployed. Other than staff officers and loan service personnel, there is currently no

standing presence of the British Army in the region. However, London is understood to be interested in establishing a large, permanent regional training mission. There are formal presences in all the regional states except Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

**Bahrain** is the centre of British naval operations and contains the only stand-alone British military base in the region, **HMS Juffair**. Announced in 2014 and commissioned late in 2017, this is a support facility for administration, warehousing and shore leave. It does not have major repair or ordnance storage facilities. The base can house 300 personnel, with about 200 ordinarily resident. The adjacent wharf can accommodate ships up to Destroyer size. It is too shallow for the new aircraft carriers to dock alongside, although they could use the much larger adjacent US Navy base.

**Qatar** hosts the command and control centre for RAF aircraft operating in the Middle East as part of **Operation Shader** against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This is co-located with the US Air Force Combined Air Operations Centre at al-Udeid Air Base. It is the HQ of 83 Expeditionary Air Group, the RAF's regional command, and an occasional presence of reconnaissance aircraft. A joint squadron of RAF and Qatar Emiri Air Force personnel is mooted to train in Lincolnshire and then deploy to Qatar by 2022.

**Oman** is the third pillar of UK forces in the region. The British presence has multiple dimensions:

- **UK Joint Logistics Support Base** at Duqm Naval Dockyard is a brand-new facility on the Arabian Sea coast owned by the Omani government and British company Babcock International. The MoD describes it as a "permanent training facility [and] key military logistics centre". Its drydock is large enough for the new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers and is considered essential to their ability to operate in the

Indian Ocean. It may also support British nuclear-powered submarines.

- Since 2015 two Royal Navy armed helicopters of 902 EAW also operate from northern Oman to patrol the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman. Once operational, the RAF's new P-8A Poseidon long range maritime patrol aircraft may also deploy from Oman.
- Around 200 British serving personnel are embedded with the Omani military as advisors, trainers and technicians on **loan service** contracts. No other state embeds so many such British personnel.
- **GCHQ**, the British electronic surveillance agency, is also reported to have three facilities in Oman to tap internet traffic.

Since 2013 the **UAE** has been the major strategic transport and aerial refuelling hub for RAF support of the long-running operations in Afghanistan, now Operation Toral, and Iraq/Syria. Transport and tanker aircraft of 906 EAW operate from al-Minhad Air Base near Dubai alongside Emirati, US, Australian, Italian and other forces. RAF Typhoon combat aircraft are also occasionally based in the UAE for exercises. The Royal Navy also has a small **UK Maritime Trade Operations** (UKMTO) office in Dubai to coordinate maritime security operations with British shipping around the Gulf. A new **British Defence Staff** office was also opened in Dubai in 2017 to support regional military training, advisory and arms sales.

**Kuwait** was the main staging post for the UK's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and did have a large presence of British Army. Its Ali al-Salem Air Base has been widely reported to be the operating base for RAF MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operating over Iraq and Syria since 2014, although the MoD refuses to confirm this. In February 2018 the British Ambassador to Kuwait stated that Britain was considering a "permanent military presence" in Kuwait additional to the 38-strong British Military Mission training team.

**Saudi Arabia** does not host any UK military facilities nor major equipment but there are around 100 UK personnel based there as trainers with the British Military Mission to the Saudi National Guard, as technicians supporting British arms exports (MoD Saudi Armed Forces Projects: MODSAP), and most controversially as liaison advisors on targeting in the Saudi air operations centre.

British naval forces in the region are largely components of **Operation Kipion**. This is a continuous naval presence in the Persian Gulf to ensure “safe flow of trade and oil in the area”. It began in 1980 during the Iran-Iraq war, initially called the Armilla Patrol. The main components are usually:

- UK Maritime Component Command (UKMCC), a naval HQ based in Bahrain.
- One destroyer or frigate on six-month deployment from the UK.
- Four mine countermeasure vessels, based in Bahrain and mostly operating off Kuwait and Iraq.
- One Bay class Dock Landing Ship (RFA Cardigan Bay), a large amphibious warfare vessel acting as mothership to the minehunters and, during operations or exercises, as deployable HQ for UKMCC.
- One tanker and/or one solid support ship to resupply the other vessels.
- Two naval helicopters based in Oman for maritime patrol.
- Up to one squadron (100 troopers) of the Royal Marines 43 Fleet Protection Group in Bahrain or aboard vessels for counter-piracy, counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism.

This means that about 20% of the Royal Navy’s total operating fleet is deployed to the Gulf region at any time.

In early 2018 for the first time in decades, the Royal Navy was without a major warship in the Gulf due to destroyer HMS Diamond breaking down en route in November 2017. The MoD

has mooted permanently basing a frigate in Bahrain in future, with crew rotating from the UK, as is done with the other vessels.

Naval operations under Operation Kipion also contribute to three maritime security missions mounted by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a US commanded coalition of 25 navies with the UKMCC head as deputy:

- **Combined Task Force 150** (CTF 150) covers the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea and Red Sea to counter terrorism and trafficking.
- **Combined Task Force 151** (CTF 151) and EU **Operation Atalanta** both aim to counter piracy off Somalia and Yemen. Atalanta is commanded from Northwood, Middlesex.
- **Combined Task Force 152** (CTF 152) aims to ensure maritime security within the Persian Gulf.

### **Do UK forces conduct military exercises in the region?**

The British Armed Forces are very active in training local forces and participating in major exercises in the region with local forces, the US and other allies. In the near future there will be a British Army desert training centre at Duqm, southern Oman.

Oman already hosts the UK’s largest military exercises. The combined arms Exercise Saif Sareea II in Oman in late 2001 involved 22,500 personnel, making it the largest British military exercise since the Cold War. Saif Sareea III in March 2018 involved over 6,000 British personnel, including an Army brigade, an RAF air wing and a Maritime Task Group of Royal Marines and Royal Navy amphibious warships.

Large numbers of local personnel are also trained at military institutions in the UK, including Sandhurst and the Royal College of Defence Studies. Many members of the ruling families of the Gulf States have attended such elite institutions, including the current rulers of

Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE. This is a source of considerable British influence.

Regional training exercises are also viewed as a useful means to demonstrate and promote British weapons to potential buyers.

### **How important are UK arms sales to the region?**

Exports to the GCC states are fundamental to the British arms industry. Since 2008, the GCC has accounted for 37% of all British military exports, with this figure increasing to above 40% since 2015. Assuming Qatar, and possibly Saudi Arabia, see through major new purchases of Typhoon and Hawk combat aircraft, the region is likely to account for over half of all British arms exports in the next few years.

Saudi Arabia alone has accounted for 27% (or £10.3 billion) of British military exports over the last decade, making it far and away the industry's biggest customer. Oman has been the third largest global market (after the US), taking over 6% (or £2.4 billion) of British arms exports. The UAE (the world's third largest arms importer) has been the seventh largest UK market, with about 2.3%. Since 2015, all the GCC states have increased their share of British military exports, with Qatar the big new customer since 2017.

While most of these states are careful to balance their procurement with large orders from US, French, Italian and, increasingly, Russian suppliers, the relationship is to some extent reciprocal and enduring. The Saudi, Omani and (in future) Qatari and Kuwaiti air forces are heavily reliant on British aircraft, weapons and technical support for their operations.

The focus of exports is very much on combat aircraft and air-launched weapons (missiles and, in the recent past, cluster bombs). While Oman and Kuwait bought British tanks and armoured vehicles in significant numbers in the 1990s, there have been few recent sales.

Sale of three corvettes to Oman's navy in 2013-14 was also anomalous. The overwhelming majority of these sales have come from BAE Systems and its affiliates, including missile manufacturer MBDA. BAE Systems also has a large number of technicians, supported by serving UK military personnel, working with regional militaries to maintain and upgrade equipment and train personnel.

The main known UK government priorities for supporting new arms sales to the region as of early 2018 were a follow-on order of 48 Typhoon fighter aircraft to Saudi Arabia (subject of a provisional agreement in March 2018), perhaps 12 Typhoon to Bahrain and a similar number of Hawk combat trainers to Kuwait. Such aircraft are usually procured in a package with air-launched weapons. All three states have been involved in the air war in Yemen.

Yemen has never been a significant buyer of British arms but has been on the receiving end of many since 2015. Successive UK governments have fought hard in the courts to resist challenges to British arms sales to Saudi Arabia on grounds of violation of international humanitarian law and massive corruption.

### **Are there regional conflicts in which the UK might become involved?**

The Arabia region has huge potential for future conflict and is already the location of one major war, in Yemen, two major international disputes, and localised terrorism or insurgency. The UK is already involved in some of these conflicts.

The **war in Yemen** has been ongoing since at least 2014, when the Ansar Allah (Houthi) movement seized control of Sana'a. It became a major international conflict in March 2015 with the intervention, largely by air attack, of a coalition of nine Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, which claims that the Houthis are an Iranian proxy force. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Sudan and others subsequently initiated

ground operations in Yemen and attempted to enforce a naval blockade of Houthi territory. While the UK military is not obviously involved in coalition combat operations in Yemen, it is known to provide advice, intelligence and training to the Saudi Air Force on targeting and is, after the US, easily the second largest supplier of aircraft and missiles to the coalition. It has also provided diplomatic protection to Saudi Arabia, particularly in the UN Security Council. British involvement in the war seems unlikely to escalate, but there is already significant reputational damage to the UK's position.

The larger challenge is avoiding a direct **military confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran**, the two rivals for regional dominance. The large presence of US and UK forces in the Persian Gulf and vast sales of arms to GCC states since the Iranian revolution is in part justified as means to deter Iran from threatening the Gulf States or their oil and gas fields. Iran's military is now vastly inferior qualitatively and quantitatively to its Arab neighbours, let alone their Western allies. Militia proxies from the two regional rivals have fought in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. A direct inter-state war could be far more damaging, especially the likely environmental and economic damage wrought on oil and gas supplies from the region. Riyadh is almost certainly less keen than Israel and the United States to engage in hostilities with Iran but could easily get sucked in to such a war. Recent changes in the US administration have raised the potential of this, contrary to British counsel.

The distraction for Saudi Arabia, as well as the UAE and Bahrain, is its **conflict with Qatar** over support for Islamist groups. These states have attempted to blockade Qatar since June 2017 to little effect. The UK, among others, has sought to stay aloof from the conflict and profited from Qatar's drive to buy diplomatic support via multi-billion-pound arms purchases. The stand-off is unlikely to turn violent due to the large US military presence

in Qatar. There is also growing Saudi and Emirati pressure on Oman, which alone of the GCC states has stood aloof from the conflicts with Yemen, Iran and Qatar.

**Internal conflict** also poses some risk of the UK becoming involved in wars in the region. This was the case in Yemen prior to the 2015 war, when British intelligence, special forces and RAF liaison officers provide some support to US efforts to combat Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) there. It is possible that greater activity by al-Qaida or Islamic State affiliates in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere could lead to greater British involvement in counter-insurgency operations. There are also risks to political stability posed by complex royal successions, not least in Oman, where the Sultan, installed by Britain in 1970, is being treated for cancer and has no known heir. Attempts by neighbouring states to influence successions, geriatric rulers, youthful populations and volatile oil prices pose risks to most Arabian states' stability in the medium term.

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