



East of Suez, West from Helmand: British Expeditionary Force and the Next SDSR

Richard Reeve

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The formal signature on 5 December of a new defence cooperation agreement between the UK and Bahrain, including the formalisation of a 'permanent' Royal Navy forward operating base in Manama, is the latest step in the current UK Government's plans to reconsolidate a military presence in the Persian Gulf. Of little significance in itself, the upgraded Bahrain naval base and the timing of its announcement are important reflections of British strategic thinking in the context of withdrawal from Afghanistan, intervention in the messy ideological and proxy wars of the wider Middle East, and the looming Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), due after the May 2015 election.

East of Suez

The UK's security relationship with Bahrain is not new. A British protectorate, along with all the other southern Gulf emirates, for a century up to 1971, the UK only scaled back its naval and air bases there in its post-1967 withdrawal from 'East of Suez'. Since 1980, when the Iran-Iraq war occasioned the deployment of the Armilla Patrol to protect friendly (oil) shipping, the Royal Navy has continuously had at least one frigate or destroyer in the Gulf, and often many more. Bahrain is their usual regional base and is home to an indefinite deployment of four British minesweepers, alongside the much larger US Navy presence.

While the US clearly eclipsed the UK as the dominant external power in the Gulf in the 1970s, British military influence has remained entrenched among elites. For example, all the current princely rulers of Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are graduates of the Royal Military Academy

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Sandhurst, often serving with the British Army. The UK remains a major supplier of weapons to all of the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman. Bahrain's police chief has been continuously advised by a former British senior officer since independence.

The UK is now expanding its facilities in Bahrain to include naval planning and command facilities, equipment and weapons storage, and accommodation for personnel. None of this much changes what the Royal Navy can do in the Gulf – indeed, the facilities in question have been under construction for some months, following a previous agreement two years ago – but Defence Secretary Michael Fallon's official comment on the deal is telling:

“ This new base is a permanent expansion of the Royal Navy's footprint and will enable Britain to send more and larger ships to reinforce stability in the Gulf. We will now be based again in the Gulf for the long term. ”

Emphasis has therefore been placed on the UK's overt and indefinite commitment to defending its interests and allies in the Persian Gulf at a time of instability, and the potential deployment of its own carrier battle groups once the Queen Elizabeth-class vessel(s) come into service after 2018.

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Notable, of course, is the failure to mention Bahrain's human rights record in any official communication of the new agreements. [Freedom House](#), for example, rates Bahrain as the least free of the Gulf States bar Saudi Arabia. Smallest and poorest of the Gulf monarchies and the only one where a Shi'a majority is ruled over by a Sunni elite, Bahrain is distinguished by its inability to buy-off dissent and thus its greater proclivity to use force against its people. Most notably, in March 2011 Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent forces to put down Bahrain's own 'Arab Spring' revolt-from-below.

International Defence Engagement

Central to the Coalition Government's strategy to consolidate its presence in the Gulf States are four strategic developments since the 2010 general election.

The first is the context of the [SDSR](#) agreed by the Coalition in late 2010, including the Future Force 2020 concept and the prioritisation of smaller armed forces into high readiness brigades, clarified since 2012 as Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF, UK only) or Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF, jointly with France or UK-led [with NATO allies](#) Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway). This is important because it reiterates that the thrust of UK strategic thinking, even in the context of austerity and withdrawal from Afghanistan, is on global power projection.

Despite the Iraqi disaster and the Afghan quagmire of its predecessor's interventions, the Coalition is keen on hard interventions – witness Libya in 2011, the vetoed attempt to intervene in Syria in 2013, and the renewed commitment to oppose the Islamic State in Iraq in 2014. Smaller, aerial reconnaissance deployments have also been made to West Africa (Chad,

Ghana, Senegal) in support of military operations in Mali (2013) and northern Nigeria (2014). Outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir David Richards stated in a [December 2012 lecture](#) that the focus of the JEF would be the Gulf and Jordan, followed by Africa and the Indian Ocean.

Second is the withdrawal from Afghanistan [announced](#) by Prime Minister Cameron in July 2011. After thirteen years of war, in late October this year British forces ended their combat operations in Helmand, where over 9,000 troops had been based. Some hundreds of British forces will remain as trainers and mentors and, more secretly, as Special Operations Forces to support the Afghan National Army, but these will not require the huge volumes of military equipment stockpiled in Afghanistan. Like the US, the UK faces an expensive dilemma of how to ship and where to put such systems designed for 'hot and high' conditions that do not pertain in the North Atlantic, or where to fly armed drones that are not licensed to share domestic airspace. The UN rapporteur on armed drone use has [suggested](#) that the RAF will want to keep its Afghan drones in the Middle East or Africa.

Third is the recommitment of UK forces to combat operations in Iraq since September 2014, expected to continue with the deployment of several hundred army trainers and special forces in January 2015. While RAF Tornado strike aircraft operate from the permanent UK base in Cyprus, there is a perceived need to revive the basing infrastructure in Gulf States that supported the 2003-09 UK occupation of southern Iraq. For example, the RAF flies electronic intelligence missions over Iraq from Qatar and the undisclosed base for its MQ-9 Reaper armed drones may be in the Gulf States.

Finally, there is what the Coalition Government calls its [International Defence Engagement Strategy](#). Approved in early 2013, the IDES sets a joint defence

and diplomacy framework for non-combat security links to allies and partner states. While this includes joint training and intelligence, much of its thrust relates to promoting UK arms sales. According to [CAAT figures](#), the UK has sold over £13.6 billion worth of military and dual-use equipment to Gulf States and Jordan since 2008, with UAE and Saudi Arabia being its second and third largest global customers (after Israel). This is particularly important in a context of austerity in that such multi-billion pound exports subsidise the development of UK weapons systems like the Eurofighter Typhoon, scores of which have been sold to Saudi and Omani air forces, with over 100 more being marketed to the UAE and Qatar. Security commitments also help to grease the multi-billion pound investments made by Gulf sovereign wealth funds in UK property and infrastructure, as well as the presence of British oil and gas companies in the region.

An Expanding Footprint

The result of these developments is what Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond calls “an expansion of Britain’s footprint” in the region, a constellation of UK bases in the Gulf and wider Middle East:

- **Bahrain** hosts the Royal Navy’s hub of maritime operations and coordination with the vast, adjacent US Naval Support Activity (NSA) facility.
- The **UAE**’s al-Minhad air base has, since January 2013, hosted the RAF’s 906 Expeditionary Air Wing (EAW), following the signature of a defence agreement with Cameron in November 2012. This is the RAF’s main air transport hub between Afghanistan and the UK but also regularly hosts Typhoon fighters, refuelling and early warning aircraft in support of joint training, combat missions and sales demonstration efforts. The Royal Navy also uses UAE port facilities.

- **Qatar**'s al-Udeid air base hosts the RAF's command centre in the Middle East, co-located with another vast US base, and 901 EAW (joint with Bahrain). RAF RC-135 Rivet Joint intelligence aircraft of 902 EAW also use the base.
- **Kuwait** no longer officially hosts UK forces since the 2009 withdrawal from Iraq but there is [speculation](#) that US and UK armed drones use Ali al-Salem air base for missions over Iraq and along Iran's borders.
- The UK also retains two parts of **Cyprus** as Sovereign Base Areas, with Akrotiri hosting a RAF combat base and an electronic listening post at Dhekelia, within 200 km of Lebanon and Syria.
- The major US base at **Djibouti** also now hosts a [UK liaison mission](#). A high-speed internet connection to RAF bases in England suggest that US armed drone flights from the base over Yemen and Somalia [may be remotely controlled](#) by US (and possibly UK) personnel at RAF Waddington.

The UK is not alone in expanding its regional footprint. France – desperate to find export markets for its Rafale fighter jets – established a 'permanent' air, land and sea base in the UAE in 2009. Australia uses al-Minhad air base for combat and armed patrol missions. Even pacifist Japan has a naval and air station at Djibouti since 2011. Since joining attacks against Islamic State in Iraq this autumn, Belgium and Netherlands use an air base in Jordan; Canadian, Danish and Italian aircraft fly out of Kuwait. The US has a massive armed presence in all of the Gulf States (including, unofficially, Saudi Arabia), Iraq, Jordan and Turkey.

Strategic Rationale

Six strategic rationale appear to guide the UK's expanding military footprint in the Persian Gulf over the last two years, and are informative of the

announcement of the Bahrain deal.

1. Supporting the recommitment of UK armed forces to Iraq to confront Islamic State and contain its threat to Jordan and Gulf States.
2. Supporting the transit and accommodation of personnel and equipment out of Afghanistan.
3. Promoting the sale of British weapons to Middle Eastern markets.
4. Protecting the supply of oil and liquefied natural gas shipments.
5. Deterring Iran in the context of a regional proxy war (with Sunni Gulf States) and inconclusive talks on regulating its potential to develop nuclear weapons.
6. Maintaining the UK's 'special relationship' as the US' key military partner.

All of these rationale give cause for concern and build to a picture of strategic inconsistency. The intervention against Islamic State appears to be **exactly what that adversary wants** as a recruiting and polarising tool. Moreover, the close security alignment of the UK with authoritarian regimes such as Bahrain or Saudi Arabia is a further recruitment tool for radical factions such as Islamic State and al-Qaida.

It also brings the UK and its NATO and Arab allies into a strange form of alliance with Iran. Whereas military containment and deterrence of Iran may have looked more desirable to the Cameron government two years ago, the growth of Sunni extremist factions in the Syrian civil war (some part funded by Gulf States), their explosive expansion to Iraq, the post-Arab Spring schism between Qatar and its neighbours, and the more constructive engagement of the new Rouhani government in Tehran since mid-2013 throw great doubt on the wisdom of throwing the UK's military weight behind one side of an

ideological and proxy struggle in which UK or regional stability would not obviously gain from a victory of either party.

Supplying arms to bolster the conventional superiority of southern Gulf states seems only likely to inflame Tehran's urge to obtain nuclear weapons or pursue its struggle through Shi'a proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and even Bahrain. As ORG's [evidence](#) to the recent Commons Defence Committee inquiry into UK policy in Iraq and Syria sets out, the Islamic State crisis is part of a much longer and wider regional conflict that can only be addressed through a grand strategy for regional reconciliation and power-sharing.

Coupled with thinking on the Joint Expeditionary Force concept, the stockpiling of British weapons in the Gulf or its environs is also troubling in that it potentially puts an onus on the Ministry of Defence finding new conflict situations in which to deploy them. Or, at least, it may give temptation to British politicians to make easy use of them by contributing to US 'remote control' operations in Yemen, Somalia, the [Sahel-Sahara](#), or elsewhere. Such operations may be counter-productive to UK and international security and frequently lack accountability.

Strategic Overstretch: Implications for the 2015 SDSR

While the emphasis of the 2010 SDSR and Future Force 2020 concept was placed on "doing more with less", the reality of the UK's strategic engagement under the Coalition government has been of doing much more and the result is increasingly [strategic overstretch as well as strategic confusion](#). The 2015 SDSR will have to rebalance the equation and it is hard to see how the recent expansion in defence commitments can be sustained.

Consider the UK's other military commitments beyond the Gulf. Apart from commitments to NATO security in the northern Atlantic, naval and air defence forces are maintained in the South Atlantic to defend the Falklands. At least one warship is deployed in the Caribbean and one off Somalia. The naval Response Force Task Group sends major annual deployments around the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. There are garrisons in Brunei, Cyprus and Gibraltar as well as an increasingly far-fetched commitment to South-east Asian security through the Five Powers Defence Agreement. The new commitment to a NATO rapid reaction force to bolster Baltic security will stretch it further.

In short, the UK's ambition to retain a full spectrum military capability anywhere in the world exceeds the capabilities of its small-but-sharp armed forces. The focus on expeditionary warfare and the urge to follow wherever the US leads is hugely expensive, detracts from the most basic role of UK territorial defence, and, based on the evidence of Iraq and Libya, if not Afghanistan, fuels rather than dampens international conflict. Seeking to finance the deficit in conventional military spending – even before paying for a renewed nuclear weapons capability – by selling more weapons to more insecure states is only likely to deepen the insecurities and antagonisms that make the Middle East such a volatile region.

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Photo: *A sailor on HMS Monmouth preparing to come alongside in Bahrain* **Source:** [Flickr](#) | [stuhillphotography](#)

About the Author

Richard Reeve is Director of the Sustainable Security Programme of Oxford Research Group.

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Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

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