

Global Security Briefing – June 2019

## **Confronting Iran: The British Dimension**

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### **Summary**

While the British Government has differed publicly with the Trump Administration on engaging Iran in multilateral dialogue, the posture of the British Armed Forces in and around the Persian Gulf mean that it would be very difficult for the United Kingdom, or its key ally Oman, to remain neutral in any military escalation of the conflict between Iran and the United States.

### **Introduction**

Just over thirty years ago, on 14 April 1988, the US Navy frigate USS [Samuel B. Roberts](#), hit a mine reportedly laid by Iran, injuring ten crew and seriously damaging the ship. The United States responded with an intensive one-day attack on Iranian naval vessels, *Operation Praying Mantis*, which sank the Iranian frigate *Sahand*, killing 45 of its crew of 125, sinking the fast attack craft, *Joshan*, killing 11 of its crew of 40 and damaging a second frigate, the *Sabaln*.

The action came towards the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War when the United States had blamed Iran for the numerous attacks on commercial shipping in the Gulf, especially of oil and natural gas tankers. In reality, the main belligerent in that “Tanker War” was actually Iraq, which conducted 283 attacks on shipping compared with 173 by Iran.<sup>1</sup>

The *Samuel B Roberts* incident and the massive US response is worth recalling at a time of renewed crisis in US/Iran relations as an indication of how incidents can rapidly intensify into something much more serious. It is also a naval action which resonates strongly in Iranian defence culture as a reminder of US naval power and is one of the reasons why the Iranian armed forces, and especially the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have devoted much effort since then to developing hybrid and irregular methods of war.

The fact that the *Sahand* was actually built by the British company Vosper Thornycroft at the Woolston Shipyard in Southampton and sold to Iran before the Iranian Revolution in 1979 is an indirect indication of the extensive UK involvement in the Middle East arms trade, but ironic in that the current confrontation includes a substantial and sustained involvement of UK forces in the region now ranged against Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Gamlen and Paul Rogers, “U.S. Flagging of Kuwaiti Tankers”, in Farhang Ranjaee, [The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression](#), University Press of Florida, 1993.

## British Naval Forces in the Persian Gulf Region

In light of the rapid build-up of tension following President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) together with the recent attacks on tankers, the build-up of US forces in the region, and Iran's decision to move towards the production of low-enriched Uranium and heavy water in excess of the JCPOA limits, there is now a real risk of war, whether through unplanned escalation or more calculated intent by either side. If the US is planning an attack on Iran, this would seem unlikely until it could bring another aircraft carrier into range – and the most likely candidate, USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* is still in trials off Virginia, several weeks sailing time away – but events like the 20 June downing of a US MQ-4 reconnaissance drone over or close to Iran illustrate how events could escalate.

In any such conflict the numbers and types of UK forces and equipment deployed in the region mean that it is difficult to see how their involvement could be avoided. Furthermore, even though the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was a significant player in the negotiations for the JCPOA and has been supportive of diplomatic means of resolving difficulties, recent British statements at ministerial level have tended to support President Trump. The level of integration of UK forces with the much larger US forces may partly explain this; separation would be difficult if not impossible in time of conflict. That Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt is running to lead the Conservative Party and country may also be pushing FCO rhetoric further from the European consensus and towards the American position.

It is also relevant to note that although Britain has maintained formal diplomatic relations with Iran at embassy level with little interruption since the 1979 Revolution, whereas the United States has not, from an Iranian perspective the UK is still seen as very much part of an integrated Anglo-American alliance acting against it. This certainly goes back to the joint CIA/MI6 operation to oust Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 but encompasses the more recent history of joint UK and US operations and alliances in the region.

Britain's naval deployments "East of Suez" were rapidly scaled down in the late 1960s and early 1970s in line with the withdrawal from the British colony of Aden (Yemen) in 1967, the independence of the British 'protectorates' within the southern Gulf (now Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE) in 1971, and the demise of the Royal Navy's Singapore-based Far East Fleet the same year. However, this withdrawal was short-lived in the Gulf region as the naval presence was rapidly reconstituted after the Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran/Iraq War in 1980. Subsequently the Armilla Patrol, a continuing naval presence, was maintained for more than two decades, hugely expanded during the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis and war with Iraq, and again during the 2003 Iraq War.

Currently, the UK naval presence is centred on Bahrain, where UK Maritime Component Command controls Operation Kipion from HMS *Juffair*, a £40 million facility opened in April 2018. Until this year the core element was a long-term presence of four minehunters supported by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) amphibious warfare ship and a

squadron of Royal Marines. There was normally an escort (destroyer or frigate) supported by another auxiliary (RFA tanker and supply ship) operating in the wider region but in 2018 it was decided that such a ship would also be based at HMS *Juffair*. Since April, the Type-23 *Duke*-class frigate HMS *Montrose* has been deployed to Bahrain for a three-year stretch.

The closeness of the Anglo-American relationship is actually shown by the history of HMS *Juffair* itself. It was originally established in 1935 by the Royal Navy but the US leased part of it in 1950 and then took it over 21 years later after Bahraini independence. In 2014, the UK negotiated to take back a section adjacent to what is now the Headquarters of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet.

The four British minehunters are seen as an important part of this much wider US-led presence in the Gulf - currently numbering [21 ships](#) of various types, including the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier and its four escorts - not least because of the extensive experience of the crews in an environment where sea mines are important. While the US Navy has four similar minehunters in the Gulf, it would certainly lean heavily on the Royal Navy to join it if dispersal of mines by Iran in the Gulf or Strait of Hormuz, the 40 km-wide entrance to the Gulf, were an outcome of greater conflict.

Furthermore, while the duties of HMS *Montrose* have been announced as "anti-piracy, anti-narcotics and boarding operations", the primary function of a Type-23 frigate is anti-submarine warfare (ASW). This makes it appropriate for countering Iranian naval forces that include conventional and mini-submarines, especially in the deeper waters of the Gulf of Oman, just outside the Strait. Curiously, having kept two ASW-capable helicopters continuously stationed in northern Oman since 2001 to patrol the Strait, the Royal Navy [withdrew these](#) in mid-April saying they "are no longer needed in Oman".

### **The Role of Oman**

In addition to HMS *Juffair* and as part of a further expansion of UK forces in the region a new Joint Logistics Support Base (JLSB) is now being established at the port city of Duqm on the Indian Ocean coast of Oman. Unlike HMS *Juffair*, this will be able to berth the Royal Navy's two new *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers as well as its nuclear-powered attack submarines. Duqm is also to be the location of a new British Army desert warfare training centre.

Military relations between the UK and Oman are extraordinarily close and a new [Joint Defence Agreement](#) was signed in Muscat in February. The current Sultan of Oman was not only educated in British military colleges - a background shared by his Bahraini, Qatari and Emirati counterparts - but was a serving British Army officer until installed as sultan in a British-engineered coup in 1970. British Armed Forces personnel have long held command and advisory positions in the Omani armed forces and some 200 remain embedded on "loan service" contracts. Despite its tiny size, Oman is the third largest export market for British arms.

Late last year JLSB Duqm was the base for the UK's largest combined military exercise for 15 years, *Saif Sareea III (Swift Sword)* involving 5,500 British personnel. At its centre was an Amphibious Task Group led by the assault ship HMS *Albion* and comprising the destroyer HMS *Dragon*, minehunters HMS *Blyth* and *Ledbury* as well as the support/command ship RFA *Cardigan Bay*, amphibious support vessel RFA *Lyme Bay* and a military ferry, MV *Anvil*. As well as a large contingent of Royal Marines, *Saif Sareea III* involved UK armour and infantry, the RAF, the Army Air Corps and Fleet Air Arm.

The whole operation is seen as preparation for long-term military engagement in the Gulf region centred eventually on the two aircraft carriers, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales*, and making for a much more substantial presence than even the current force levels in Bahrain. Among other initiatives, the RAF is setting up its first [joint fighter squadron](#) since the Second World War with the Qatar Emiri Air Force and there has been talk of [expanding](#) the long-term British Military Mission in Kuwait.

While Oman may be unique among the Gulf States in having a closer security relationship with the UK than with the United States, and a more open stance towards Iran, it reached [agreement](#) with Washington on US Navy access to Duqm in March and the US supercarrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* was berthed there in mid-June. This presence on the Arabian Sea coast is increasingly important for the US as it confronts Iran. While it has a massive military infrastructure from Iraq through all the southern Gulf States to the Strait, these are potentially vulnerable to Iranian missile attack and it does not expect to be able to operate carriers or submarines within the Persian Gulf in the event of war with Iran.

### Some Wider Connections

As well as the direct involvement of UK forces in the Persian Gulf, there are many other [close connections](#) with the US military that are relevant to the current tensions with Iran, not least the large US intelligence gathering centre at RAF Menwith Hill near Harrogate in North Yorkshire, other joint listening posts in British overseas territories on Cyprus (Ayios Nikolaos Station) and Diego Garcia, and the rapidly expanding intelligence base at RAF Croughton, north of Oxford.

Through its base at Mildenhall in Suffolk the US Air Force has an important staging location for Special Operations Forces and reconnaissance aircraft, and these can also use the much closer RAF base at Akrotiri on Cyprus. More significant may be RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire which is used for staging strategic bombers from the United States through to the Middle East. Fairford is unique in Europe in being the only base equipped with the climate-controlled hangars that are essential for the operation of the B-2 stealth bomber.

Equally important in this regard is the ability of the US Navy and Air Force to operate out of the British-controlled atoll of Diego Garcia in the central Indian Ocean, which is also equipped to handle the B-2 and other US strategic bombers. While nearly 4,000 km from Iran, flights from this base would not need to overfly any other state's territory on the

way, as they would from Fairford. This would again make it difficult for the UK Government to refuse the United States permission to use Diego Garcia, even as it faces [strong pressure](#) from virtually the entire United Nations to return sovereignty of the depopulated archipelago to Mauritius.

Also relevant is one of the largest US Air Force munitions stockpile sites in Europe at RAF Welford, 35 km southeast of Fairford, in Berkshire. It may just be a coincidence that last month a US Air Force unit [moved a substantial quantity of munitions](#) from the United States through a port of entry, reported to be Newport in South Wales, to Welford. In this five-day operation, the largest of its kind for a decade, 71 trucks moved 121 containers with 450,000 lb (204,000 kg) net explosive weight.

### **Conclusion: International by Design**

The assumption underlying all of this is that, while the UK is progressively re-embracing a global military role that it retreated from half-a-century ago, its armed forces are now too small to operate independently and will therefore only do so as part of an alliance. Given the much greater force levels of the United States and the existing degree of interoperability, it is the obvious partner and it follows that what is now **happening** in the confrontation with Iran may well serve as a model for future operations, especially if the UK does part company with the European Union.

What had perhaps not been anticipated is that the first example should be in a confrontation with Iran precipitated by the unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA nuclear agreement of the United States much against the advice of the UK and other allies. As with the proposed deployment in 2021 of the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* carrier strike group with a mixed assortment of British and US aircraft and escorts to waters close to China, with which London and Washington have quite different relations, this highlights some of the dangers inherent in the British Armed Forces' "International by Design" mantra.

To make it more problematic it also comes at a time of political upheaval and uncertainty in the UK coupled with widespread opposition to the politics of President Trump. By late July, Britain will have a new Prime Minister, no doubt anxious to solidify his relations with a White House increasingly at odds with its other European allies. If the present crisis with Iran does escalate to a major conflict, then the UK's embracing of a globalised military posture dependent on the United States will certainly be called into question. Even if such a conflict is avoided, it should at least lead to a more serious debate about the UK's place in the world.

For more on the potential for and risks of war between Iran, the United States and Israel see:

[Confronting Iran: To What End?](#) (May 2019)

[Iran, the US and the Risk of Accidental War](#) (Oct 2018)

[The Risk and Consequences of an Israel-Iran War](#) (May 2018)

[Trump and Bolton: Making a Greater American Century?](#) (Mar 2018)

For more background on the UK military presence in the Gulf region see:

[ORG Explains #2: The UK Military Presence in the Arabian Peninsula](#)

For more information on the UK-US defence and security relationship see:

[ORG Explains #6: UK-US Defence and Security Relations](#)

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