



A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf

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Foreword

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At a time of economic retrenchment and growing uncertainty within Europe, it may seem strange that the UK sees its future military security increasingly 'east of Suez'. Such an emotive phrase suggests imperial ambitions at a time when UK armed forces are smaller than they have been for 200 years. But there are compelling reasons for the UK to take its Gulf relationships much more seriously.

The military intends to build up a strong shadow presence around the Gulf; not an evident imperial-style footprint, but a smart presence with facilities, defence agreements, rotation of training, transit and jumping-off points for forces that aim to be more adaptable and agile as they face the post-Afghanistan years from 2014. The Minhad airbase at Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as the key to this smart presence and more will be heard about it, alongside the Typhoon deal with the UAE, in the near future.

This may not yet be declared government policy; indeed, the government may prefer not to plunge into a public debate about it. But the UK appears to be approaching a decision point where a significant strategic reorientation of its defence and security towards the Gulf is both plausible and logical. This was not an evident assumption of the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review and it remains to be seen whether the government will choose to enshrine a reinvigorated Gulf policy as a strategic shift in its defence and security focus. But there are compelling reasons for the government to consider it during 2013, in the light of the outcome of the UAE state visit to the UK at the end of this month.

The military and security case is that British forces would value the training areas, access to the Gulf and the Indian Ocean and the benefits of collaboration with Gulf forces it would bring; and also the message of resolve it would send to Iran, and others, that with the Middle East in near meltdown, the UK takes Gulf security seriously. In this resolve, it would be reinforcing its military partnership with the US in the non-European theatres that most matter now to Washington – and that are all east of Suez.

The political case that backs this up is that the previous governments of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were accused by Gulf leaders of neglecting their relationships in an eagerness to reach out to China and Asia. There is some important ground to make up and the Gulf powers, in their military weakness and economic strength, are more pivotal to UK security and prosperity than was the case a decade ago. Trade between the UK and the UAE reached £14 billion last year and the UAE alone invested £8 billion in UK projects. The biggest single group of UK expatriates – over 100,000 – live and work in the UAE. Qatar is believed to invest around £20 billion in the UK and may soon add another £10–15 billion in infrastructure investment. Qatar is, in any case, the prime supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) into the UK, and as demand in the country rises over the next decade, and as storage capacity increases, Qatar's importance as an LNG trading partner is set to increase.

Such a policy shift, if it becomes reality and is acknowledged, is not without its dangers. The military does not intend to 'deploy' to the Gulf in any significant way, but it hopes to create the facilities to rotate back and forth; to pass through; to jump off from. Even so, this might represent more stretch on an already overstretched military establishment. It will not be easy to reconcile such a bilateral reorientation with the UK's European responsibilities, or with its major European allies, at a time of increasing disunity across the continent. Not least, any security commitments in the Gulf put the UK in the path of the swirling social storms across the region – the 'Arab awakening' – and all that is implied by backing governments that are now shying away from liberal reforms. This may be a very good, or a very bad, time to create overt security co-operation in the region.

Of course, this can all be presented as no more than continuity. A Defence Cooperation Accord between the UK and the UAE was concluded in 1996 and then left moribund by the Blair government of 1997. This just gets the old routine back on track. And the UK's withdrawal from East of Suez between 1967 and 1971 was hardly absolute, and left a lot of security co-operation in place, as this briefing shows. There is some truth in both these ideas and the government will want to stress continuity more than strategic re-thinking. We have produced this briefing, therefore, to collate and interpret some of the most salient developments between the UK and the Gulf states over the last twelve months and to place them in historical perspective.

The government is moving towards some important policy choices in the way it interprets the future role and appropriate areas of responsibility for the UK's armed forces. It has not yet made, let alone announced, a shift in defence-policy priorities. But the prime minister has taken a more strategic view of UK relations with the Gulf and the last twelve months have seen the UK move down a road where a policy shift, whether announced or not, could take place in the near future for a mixture of reasons that reinforce each other. We hope this briefing helps set up the terms of a debate that we think will continue for the rest of this year, and some way beyond.

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A Return to East of Suez?

Towards the end of 2012, the activities of Prime Minister David Cameron during a visit to the Gulf generated significant attention on two issues. The first of these was his attempts to facilitate the sale of 100 Typhoon multi-role fighters to several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), supplied by BAE Systems, in a deal worth £6 billion (the UAE alone is interested in sixty aircraft, worth some £3 billion). The second issue, at the time perhaps less reported, was the announcement of a joint defence partnership between the UK and the UAE. Seemingly tied to the Typhoon deal, the partnership was described as focusing on 'close collaboration' in the development of the fighter – in effect, working with, building the capacity of, and future-proofing the UAE's defence industry.

Cameron's foray into the Gulf followed a visit in October to Bahrain by Defence Secretary Philip Hammond, which saw the signing of a UK-Bahrain defence co-operation agreement. These activities awakened an interest among observers and analysts that the UK was perhaps becoming increasingly involved, directly, in underwriting the security of the southern Gulf. These notions were given further impetus in the 2012 RUSI Christmas Lecture given by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Sir David Richards, in which pointed reference was made to the deployment of UK military assets to the Middle East, and in particular to some of the Arab Gulf states and to Jordan.

These developments led observers, including the *Guardian's* Richard Norton-Taylor and Nick Hopkins, to describe the plans as constituting 'the most significant new deployment of UK armed forces since Afghanistan', and that the CDS has signalled '[t]he return to "east of Suez"',¹ some thirty-two years after the UK unceremoniously left the Gulf in 1971.

But how accurate is it to say that the UK is returning 'east of Suez'? Indeed, did the UK ever really leave? The facts would say that the UK did not; rather, the UK presence in the Gulf endured in particular, with the military posture reacting to the needs of the day, and the political relationships oscillating between different governments. We may, in fact, be witnessing something more evolutionary than revolutionary and transformational. Instead of seeing the activities of Cameron, Hammond and Richards as something distinctly new, we should in fact see them as the codification of a series of ad-hoc initiatives, arrangements and developments that have occurred since 1971, and the forging of a more coherent strategy that packages together military deployments, defence sales, comprehensive bilateral engagements and wider issues concerning the UK's place in international affairs – with particular reference to the continued advancement of the 'special relationship' with the US. Furthermore, the recent initiative is not the first of its kind. The blueprint of the current engagement was established by the UK-UAE Defence Cooperation Accord (DCA), signed in 1996 by then-Defence Secretary Michael Portillo on behalf of the Conservative government of John Major. Largely ignored by the subsequent Labour government, it seems that new life is being breathed into the DCA by Whitehall's renewed determination to engage with the Arab Gulf states.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that the scale of the military deployment being discussed is significant. The RAF is set to use the Al-Minhad air base in Dubai (currently used extensively in the logistics chain between the UK and Afghanistan) as a hub not only for the 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan, but as an overseas base of some standing in the future.² The Royal Navy is also taking a more active interest in Bahrain, which is already home to the United Kingdom Maritime Component Command (UKMCC). Reports also suggest that senior army personnel are keen to build on their strong links with Oman. And the Emir of Qatar has reportedly been assured by Cameron of the UK's commitment to the gas-rich emirate, with Doha a favoured location for UK military liaison and co-ordination activities in the Gulf.

There is significantly more at stake in this renewed relationship than mere military posturing. By enhancing the UK's relationships with the states of the southern Gulf, the UK is committing to the security and longevity of the Arab Gulf states – sheikhdoms which display only limited elements of democratisation (as understood in the West) and which have taken seemingly contradictory positions towards the Arab upheavals that spread across the Middle East since 2011, opposing the Shia revolt in Bahrain but supporting the Islamist revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria. The UK will also find itself very much on the fault line of searing sectarianism, between the Sunni and Shia worlds of Islam, that is increasingly defining the geopolitical landscape of Gulf and Middle Eastern security. With Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and (to a lesser extent) Kuwait all contending with significant sectarian

challenges to their internal security, and with Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in what is so far a sectarian cold war in which the temperature could quite easily rise, the unintended consequences and outcomes of the UK's strategic embrace of Arab Gulf states should not be underestimated.

Lastly, this move is not just about securing loyal and wealthy allies in the Gulf. It is also a different iteration of the transatlantic special relationship. Much has been written about the Obama administration's 'Asia pivot' – the refocusing of US efforts away from the Middle East and towards the Far East and Pacific Rim.³ The likelihood of the US being drawn away from the Gulf to a significant degree as a result of this intended 'rebalancing' remains a point of contention.⁴ Whether the US wishes to, or even can, reduce its force commitment to a region that has had such prominence in its affairs over several decades should be questioned. Indeed, there is a line of thought that the Obama 'pivot' may see the Gulf region become even more important to US strategic planners, with one prominent commentator noting that:⁵

For geopolitical reasons [including China's increasing reliance upon Gulf energy exports] the American pivot toward Asia, and indeed sub-Saharan Africa for that matter, cannot be completed without control of the Persian Gulf, and while the US is happy to put the '9/11 wars' behind it and wind down its expensive and traumatic military campaigns in Iraq (which ended in December 2011) and Afghanistan, it cannot delink from the Persian Gulf.

But irrespective of whether the US remains in the Gulf or not, a clear strategic choice seems to have been made concerning where the country's strategic focus and attention will be in the future – and that is in the East. The UK's more obvious and effective engagement in the southern Gulf, which will likely create opportunities for further engagement in the region incorporating the Indian Ocean and the sub-continent, could be seen as a new geopolitical expression of the US-UK special relationship – perhaps designed to emphasise to Washington the value of an enduring, if changed, special relationship with the UK.

UK Involvement in Gulf Security

'Return east of Suez' is an emotive phrase in British politics, on both the Left and the Right. It recalls the highly controversial decision by Harold Wilson's Labour government between 1966 and 1968 to abort the new power-projection platforms (the full-deck carrier CVA01, and the TSR-2 and then the F-111 aircraft) and withdraw British military forces from the major bases in Arabia (Aden and the Gulf), Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Singapore) and the Indian Ocean (the Maldives) by 1971.

While Labour ministers, such as Tony Benn, Richard Crossman and Barbara Castle, rejoiced in the sounding of 'the death-knell of the British empire east of Suez',⁶ the former Conservative prime minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, called the decision to withdraw 'a dereliction of stewardship, the like of which this country has not seen in the conduct of foreign policy before.'⁷ It should be noted, however, that after the Conservatives returned to power in 1970 under Edward Heath, they failed to follow their rhetoric in opposition, instead going ahead with the military withdrawal. All eyes, whether on the Left or the Right, were set on a European future, in the EEC and NATO. As a fig leaf to cover the withdrawal, Britain retained a 'capability' to send forces back east of Suez. But there were only small military footholds at Diego Garcia, in the British Indian Ocean Territory, Brunei, Hong Kong (until the handover to China in 1997) and a refuelling station (literally a floating dock) at Singapore to enable the UK to carry out its commitment in Southeast Asia as required by the terms of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).⁸

Yet, with regard to Arabia and the Gulf, the formal withdrawal from major bases east of Suez did not signal the end of British military involvement there – far from it. The undignified scuttle from Aden in 1967 soon led the new Marxist-Leninist regime in South Yemen to intervene on behalf of the rebels in the Dhofar province of the neighbouring Sultanate of Oman. The threat of a Soviet-backed revolutionary regime in Oman, controlling the Arabian side of the Strait of Hormuz, led the Heath government to send in the SAS to assist the Sultan's armed forces, along with a large Iranian army contingent, in defeating the insurgency by 1975. Four years later, the Royal Navy was back in the Gulf with the Armilla Patrol, performing its traditional role, in support of the US Navy, of policing the seas as the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War spilled into the Gulf. The return of the Royal Navy was evidence enough of the folly of leaving the guardianship of the Gulf to two of its traditional antagonistic heavyweights, Iran and Saudi Arabia, under the US government's 'twin pillars' policy.

The collapse of the Iranian pillar, with the fall of the shah in 1979, raised serious questions about the stability of the remaining Saudi pillar and, indeed, the continued viability of US policy. It took the third heavyweight, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, to reveal, in three large-scale and bloody wars (1980–88; 1990–91 and 2003–11), the consequences of the collapse of the state system in the Gulf following Britain's withdrawal in 1971, and the dangers of engaging with local aggressors – whether through confrontation or appeasement. As part of US-led coalitions, Britain had to commit large forces in both 1990–91 and 2003–07 to help defeat the successive attempts by Iraq to alter the balance of power in the Gulf.

As well as repeated military interventions in Arabia and the Gulf, usually in concert with the United States, Britain followed the American lead after

1971 and engaged in the wholesale export of advanced weapons systems to Arab Gulf states. These usually came with training teams, in addition to military officers already on secondment to the armed forces of these states. As the Anglo-Saudi Al-Yamamah I and II projects show, these were enormously lucrative for the British defence industry and helped successive British governments to subsidise the costs of equipping the British armed forces. The deal, through which the UK received payment in the form of 600,000 barrels of oil per day, to an estimated value of £40 billion over thirty years, constituted the UK's largest ever export arrangement.⁹ However, it has proven to be as controversial as it was lucrative. The downside of these agreements came with the complicated oil-barter, offset and export-credit aspects, not to mention allegations of corruption. Coupled with the significant investments of the sovereign-wealth funds of the Arab Gulf states in British property, companies, banks and universities, we can see how intertwined and interdependent Britain's relationship with these states has become in the last forty years.¹⁰ Such is the mutual strategic interest in each other's survival that it could be argued that Britain never really disengaged from the region east of Suez, or at least from Arabia and the Gulf.

But does this mean that Britain is committed to the defence of the Arab Gulf states in the way it was before 1971? Indeed, does the 2012 speech at RUSI by the CDS, along with the clutch of defence agreements recently signed by Britain with Bahrain and the UAE, signal a deepening of the defence commitment to the extent that we are looking at a formal return to bases east of Suez, or at least in the Gulf?

The Military Vision

In his speech,¹¹ General Sir David articulated a vision of the future that radiated confidence, optimism and, above all, boldness when discussing the new Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the Royal Navy's maritime and amphibious components and the future of the army's brigades. One section of his speech was especially striking: 'Britain's JEF will be capable of projecting power with global effect and influence. Nowhere is more important to us than our friends in the Middle East and Gulf and in line with clear political intent we would expect, with other initiatives, for JEF elements to spend more time reassuring and deterring in the region.'

He went on to explain in more detail how the 'Royal Navy will continue to grow in importance. As our carrier capability comes into service it will be a key part of our diplomatic, humanitarian and military strategy.' And, in line with the Army 2020 reforms, '[w]hile we will retain three high-readiness manoeuvre brigades, we will also have "adaptable brigades" to sustain enduring operations and routinely develop partnerships around the world.' As for the deployment of these brigades:

[T]hough more conceptual work is needed, given the importance of the region and clear Prime Ministerial intent, I envisage two or more adaptable brigades forming close tactical level relationships with particular countries in the Gulf and Jordan, for example, allowing for better cooperation with their forces. Should the need arise for another Libya-style operation, we will be prepared. This would greatly enhance our ability to support allies as they contain and deter threats and, with our naval presence in Bahrain, air elements in the UAE and Qatar, and traditional but potentially enhanced roles in Oman, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, would make us a regional ally across the spectrum.

Nor is the focus is just on the Middle East:

In Africa, brigades would be tasked to support key allies in the east, west and south whilst another might be given an Indian Ocean and SE Asian focus, allowing for much greater involvement in the FPDA, for example.

The Plans Unfold

Further details have become apparent in the intervening months, all of which illustrate the significance of these plans, suggesting that they have real traction in the government's defence establishment and will be core elements of UK defence strategy in the years ahead. Indeed, while General Sir David's RUSI speech was a clear statement of intent, Prime Minister Cameron and the Defence Secretary Philip Hammond had already made moves in this regard.

On 11 October 2012, Hammond signed a defence co-operation agreement with Bahrain, which, according to the Minister for International Security Strategy Dr Andrew Murrison, 'provides a framework for current and future defence engagement activity, including training and capacity-building, in order to enhance the stability of the wider region. The Accord complements existing agreements',¹² including the Royal Navy's continued use of the Jufair naval base since the inauguration of the Armilla Patrol in 1979.

On 7 November, meanwhile, during a two-day stopover in the Gulf, Cameron agreed 'a long-term defence partnership' with the UAE for the 'security of the UAE and the wider Gulf region'. This 'involves close collaboration around Typhoon and a number of new technologies', an increase in the number of joint military and training exercises between the two countries, and a commitment to invest 'in the British military presence in the UAE'. This all amounted to a 'boosting of the British military presence in the Gulf.'¹³ As if to emphasise the point, Cameron visited the Al-Minhad air base in Dubai with Emirati officials to inspect RAF Typhoons based there during a

training exercise. The RAF is also using the air base as a logistics hub for the mission in Afghanistan, and it would certainly be more convenient for the UK government to transfer the considerable amount of military equipment currently in theatre to a secure overseas facility such as Al-Minhad – from where it could easily be redeployed to areas prone to conflict in the Middle East, Asia and Africa – rather than shipping it all to the UK, given the diminished likelihood of it being needed in a European war.

The army, too, seems keen to secure its place in the sun, particularly in view of the coming withdrawal of the British Army of the Rhine from Germany and the loss of prime exercise ranges on the Continent. By reinvigorating its relationship with the Sultanate of Oman, the army would find itself located in a country of geopolitical importance, with thousands of square miles of challenging terrain ideally suited to the training of military units in the skills of desert warfare. Furthermore, the Omani government has maintained strong institutional relationships with the UK to complement the more personal links enjoyed between elites in both countries.

It would, of course, be impossible to leave Qatar out of any development as significant as a British return to the Gulf, not least because of the long-established personal associations between Qatari and UK elites; Doha's overt, and successful, attempts to be involved in international affairs, seen throughout the Arab upheavals across the Middle East (although they have been rather less involved in such events in the Gulf – in Bahrain, for example); and the country's immense financial power generated by huge Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports (with Qatar being by far the largest supplier to the LNG-dependent UK, accounting for 85 per cent of UK LNG supplies in 2011).¹⁴ It is not surprising, then, that David Cameron has made notable efforts to further the links between London and Doha, with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, visiting Downing Street in October 2010, and with the prime minister visiting the emir in early 2011. Given that Qatar does not need further assistance in the area of air defence, with the US Air Force located at the Al-Udeid base west of Doha, and that the country is less attractive to the army than Oman, Qatar seems well placed to host a UK command, with a co-ordinating or liaison role. Furthermore, with the Emir intent on making Doha the focal point of political, economic and cultural life in the Gulf (in competition with Dubai and, increasingly, Abu Dhabi), the range of international organisations, and associated Western interests, based on the Qatari peninsula makes the country a useful networking location in a wider regional environment.

Whether all of this amounts to a 'return to east of Suez' entailing commitments akin to those of the 1960s is, of course, debatable. However, both public statements and circumstantial evidence point to the current British government's commitment to deepening the strategic defence relationship

with the UAE which, in effect, amounts to a dusting off of the 1996 DCA. Meanwhile, ties continue to be strong with Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia – which, as the home to Islam’s two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, does not permit the presence of foreign forces on its soil. But we also seem to be witnessing the slow transformation in the UK military posture towards a tentative return (at this early stage) to the pre-1971 strategy of rooting Britain’s presence in the southern Gulf through agreements with its traditional allies in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, with outlying anchors in Bahrain and Oman, and with close political and economic ties with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that could be upgraded to the military level if necessary.

Gulf Security and the Special Relationship

Since 1987, and the reflagging of the Kuwaiti oil tankers, the United States has played the role of the reluctant policeman in the Gulf. Given the bitter, more recent experience of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US appetite for continuing such a role may well be waning. Alarm bells are already ringing in the chancelleries of Europe at the US’s stated intent to downgrade the importance of the Gulf and pivot towards the Pacific. Quite simply, as noted by Fawaz Gerges, the Middle East does not top Obama’s foreign-policy agenda; instead, US priorities now lie in Asia (and particularly the Far East) and the Pacific Rim.¹⁵ However, the extent of the Obama administration’s disengagement from the Gulf has been exaggerated by some. There is still a commitment in Washington, at least in the Pentagon and in the State Department, to Israel in particular, and also to dealing with the next big problem in the Gulf – namely, the perceived Iranian nuclear threat to the Middle East and, of course, to the Arab Gulf states. Yet, just as the UK’s withdrawal in 1971 created a security vacuum that drew the US, somewhat unwillingly, further into the affairs of the Gulf, the US’s cooling of its engagement seems to be drawing the UK back in.

However, it seems that the UK is taking on this burden of underpinning security in the Gulf both out of necessity and of desire. Certainly, it is of considerable economic benefit to the UK to be the leading European – and, indeed, Western – player in the Gulf. And it is undeniable that the UK defence and policy establishment still finds it straightforward, enjoyable even, to engage with their equivalents in the Gulf in a way, perhaps, that has often eluded the Americans. There is also a ‘domestic’ military rationale for the UK in developing closer defence ties with the Gulf, given that the army’s imminent withdrawal from Germany will both curtail decades of experience of maintaining forces overseas and erode some of what has distinguished the UK military from its European counterparts.

There is also, however, a further pillar supporting the UK’s re-engagement with the Gulf: the special relationship with the US. In many ways, the CDS’s speech at RUSI and the actions of UK senior politicians at the end of 2012 should be seen as signalling to Washington, Europe and the Gulf states

Britain's military intent to do more in the region, with the object of sustaining broad international engagement with the defence task in hand – namely, deterring Iran.

In so doing, the UK is once again demonstrating a keen focus on its foundational security and defence strategy since the Second World War – the maintenance and nurturing of the special relationship with the US. With the Obama administration lukewarm to the notion of any sort of special relationship with any country at all, and with the only remaining, significant operation in which the US and UK work closely together coming to an unceremonious end in 2014, there is a clear need to 'do something' if the strategy of being close to the Americans – in terms of political norms, military interconnectivities and global influence – is to be maintained. As the first of the second-tier European states to move swiftly, and willingly, into the maelstrom of Middle East and Gulf politics, the UK is positioning itself at the heart of a region that will remain keenly important to the US in the future, but not quite as important as areas further east. Furthermore, it enables the UK to play a more substantial role in India and Pakistan, and possibly also to intervene in the current situation in Syria, in any post-2014 crises in Afghanistan, or even in Iraq. In short, the UK is giving renewed emphasis to its position in the Gulf in order to *maintain* the special relationship with the US, and not because the special relationship has ended.

Unintended Consequences

Engagement in the Gulf is not a straightforward matter. Indeed, few regions of the world embody as much potential for instability, with threats emanating from a range of sources.

Clearly, the immediate security concern to the entire Gulf region is the future direction of Iran's nuclear programme, and how the Islamic Republic's domestic political dynamics play out in a period characterised by profound internal political, social and economic challenges. At present, with the latest round of talks in Almaty having achieved relatively little, the international community, and especially Israel and the Arab Gulf states, remain fearful of Iranian nuclear ambitions. Iran, too, is entering a volatile period in the run-up to national elections. It is also becoming increasingly desperate to shore up its regional allies, given that the Assad regime is contending with the existential challenge posed by Syrian civil war.¹⁶ With Syria no longer a meaningful ally for Iran, Iraq is now firmly seen by Tehran as a key element in the preservation of its national security, and the Gulf, with its Shia populations and seemingly fragile states, is viewed as a region in which Iran should be reasserting its previous imperial levels of authority. As such, the UK could very quickly find itself with significant military forces based in one of the world's most contested regional security complexes.

However, Iran's nuclear programme is only one concern about Iran with a direct impact upon the Gulf states. Another, perhaps of even greater concern to the hereditary – and Sunni – sheikhdoms, emirates and kingdoms of the Arab Gulf, is the political mobilisation of Arab Shia communities in these states.

With the consolidation of a new narrative of nationhood constructed around a majority Shia identity in Iraq,¹⁷ Gulf states have been openly nervous since 2003 about the potential rise in Shia militancy – and they have good reason to be. Shia communities have long been treated as second-class citizens in the Arab Gulf states. In Saudi Arabia, for example, some 15 per cent of citizens are Shia, most of whom live in the oil-rich Eastern Province. The arrest of sixteen Saudi Shia in February 2013 on charges of spying for Iran points to the very real tensions that exist in the Kingdom.¹⁸ The situation is difficult in countries where Shia are numerous but not a majority, with their leaders making demands for human rights to be recognised in countries, such as in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, that traditionally have a relaxed view of such matters. In places where Shia are in a majority, however, such as in Bahrain, the situation is far more severe. Indeed, Bahrain – where the Royal Navy has access to facilities – has remained highly destabilised since anti-government demonstrations, associated principally with the Shia community, began in February 2011. These demonstrations have been forcefully put down by Bahrain's security services, and with the involvement of Saudi forces.

As such, the UK's forging of closer political and military relationships with certain Arab Gulf states is without doubt potentially controversial. By enhancing its position in the Gulf, the UK will be sending a clear signal that, in the Arab Gulf littoral at least, it supports the preservation of monarchical (and, in Western eyes, undemocratic) regimes at a time when revolutionary Islamist forces are sweeping across the Middle East and the Muslim world. There will be those who will seek to present the position of the British government as backing 'the forces of conservatism' in the Middle East, and securing defence and trade contracts with the Arab Gulf states at the expense of an apparent moral obligation of pursuing universal human rights and the promotion of democratic norms. This is a falsely framed debate, redolent of that rolled out during the era of the Nasserist Arab nationalist revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, which seeks to set the virtuous revolutionaries against the wicked reactionaries. It is an attractive, but naïve, reading of the Arab upheavals which have facilitated the growing triumph of Muslim conservatism in its various forms across the Middle East, aided and abetted, and certainly not opposed, by the Gulf Arab states.

Furthermore, the Gulf states' perception of the UK's plans may also differ from that of the UK itself. In terms of threat perception, the Gulf states are increasingly focused on 'hard'-power crises and domestic instabilities,

which are assuaged by having in place treaties that serve to protect them from their enemies outside and, perhaps, within. But the UK approach – impressive though it is – remains very much in the early planning stages: for example, the Adaptive Brigades earmarked for possible deployment will not be structured for significant combat operations, nor will they be held ‘at readiness’. By the CDS’s own admission, when speaking at RUSI, they will be, in effect, large and capable training teams. While the very act of providing targeted, focused and intensive training will certainly send messages, it is a very big assumption to believe that these messages would be interpreted in the right way in, for example, Tehran. Theoretically, the substitution of the US presence with a UK one may make sense, but this can never be a like-for-like replacement. No matter how capable the Royal Navy may be, its limited presence (presumably, at most, a small number of frigates and destroyers) in the Gulf, along with a limited army training presence in the UAE and Oman, and a handful of Typhoons in the UAE, is tokenism of the sort that communicates one’s message but lacks the credibility to provide either deterrence or a force capable of proactive and successful engagement. Rather, there is a danger that the deployment would be large enough to ‘get us into trouble’ but too small to get us out of trouble once it starts.¹⁹

Conclusion

Are we witnessing a ‘return east of Suez’, with a focus on the Gulf, or not? We would argue that the UK never left the Gulf in the first place – rather, its presence there adapted to both economic constraints in the UK and realities as they emerged in the Gulf. In fact, recent efforts by the UK government constitute a reformation of the country’s engagement with Gulf states. This reformation, or perhaps more accurately a rationalisation, has seen the government, at a high level, bring together a range of ad-hoc engagements in Gulf states – in the trade, defence and wider security spheres – into some form of coherent strategy.

But even if we accept the argument that a coherent strategy is emerging, is there any sense, as yet, that the implications of a closer relationship will be proactively managed? In all likelihood, the response to the more challenging aspects of such engagement with the Gulf will be to formulate a classic ‘muddle-through’ that presents the UK’s actions and its closer relationships in the region as ultimately seeking to improve, through the use of soft power, its partners’ domestic political situations. In this way, the great liberal dilemma between arms sales and the promotion of democratic values will remain acknowledged but unresolvable for the duration of this reinvigorated partnership.

But, to what end? Prior to the decision to withdraw from Aden and the Gulf by 1971, Britain’s position east of Suez had a strategic rationale that could be clearly articulated with reference to imperial legacies, the need to

contain the Soviet Union, and the economic exigencies of maintaining access to oil. It made sense, until the Labour government decided in 1966–68, for party-political reasons, to end Britain's permanent presence east of Suez. If the UK is serious in its reformulating its focus on the Gulf, once again, then a straightforward question needs to be answered: *what is the strategic purpose of the return 'east of Suez'?*

If it is to deter Iran, then this requires a strategy that is multifaceted and coalition-based, underpinned by the ready availability of a credible and significant military force. If it is only to strengthen the UK's ties to the Arab Gulf states for a range of reasons including an increase in defence sales, trade and investment, then this should be acknowledged publicly and it should be explained that such limited engagements are necessary at a time when the entire region is in a state of political flux. The military-strategic and political lines of operation can be mutually complementary, but they need to be articulated as such in order to ensure a clear, readily understood British policy and strategy regarding the Gulf.

Until this is done, it is too early to say whether a new generation of British servicemen and women are going to be able to recite, at least on a regular basis, the modern version of Kipling's doggerel:²⁰

Ship me somewhere east of Suez, where the best is like the worst.
Where there ain't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst

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Notes and References

1. Richard Norton-Taylor and Nick Hopkins, 'Defence Chief Signals Major UK Military Presence in Gulf', *Guardian Defence and Security Blog*, 18 December 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/defence-and-security-blog/2012/dec/18/british-army-the-gulf-defence>>, accessed 22 April 2013.
2. Some reports have suggested that the RAF is also considering the use of Al-Dhafra air base in Abu Dhabi, home to a small number of French Air Force Mirage 2000s. It seems, however, that the RAF has discounted Al-Dhafra in favour of Al-Minhad.

3. See Lanxin Xiang, 'China and the "Pivot"', *Survival* (Vol. 54, No. 5, October–November 2012), pp. 113–28.
4. See Fawaz A Gerges, 'The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?' *International Affairs* (Vol. 89, No. 2, March 2013), pp. 299–324.
5. Ehteshami, *Dynamics of Change in the Persian Gulf*, pp. 252–53.
6. John W Young, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970, Vol.2, International Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 49.
7. J B Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 57.
8. The FPDA is a 'loose consultative arrangement' between the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, signed in 1971; see Carlyle A Thayer, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever', *Security Challenges* (Vol. 3, No. 1, February 2007), pp. 79–96; Damon Bristow, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements: Southeast Asia's Unknown Regional Security Organization', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (Vol. 27, No. 1, April 2005).
9. See *BBC News*, 'Arms Sales Fuel BAe's Profits', 25 February 1999; UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 'UK's Relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain: Written Evidence from C.R.G. Murray, Newcastle Law School, Newcastle University', Session 2012–13, 7 January 2013.
10. The states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC – comprising Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman) housed sovereign-wealth funds worth an estimated \$600 billion–\$1 trillion at the end of 2008. The scale of these funds enables some GCC states (and, in particular Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) to be significant sources of net global capital flows: see Gawdat Bahgat, 'Sovereign Wealth Funds in the Gulf – An Assessment', in David Held and Kristian Ulrichsen (eds), *The Transformation of the Gulf: Politics, Economics and the Global Order* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 218–35. Statistics concerning the bilateral relationships between the UK and Gulf states give a sense of the scale of economic interaction. With Saudi Arabia, for example, there was nearly \$4 billion in bilateral trade in 2011, and approximately 200 UK-Saudi joint ventures with total investment of more than \$11 billion: see Frank Gardner, 'Saudi Arabia "Insulted" by UK Inquiry', *BBC News*, 15 October 2012. Qatar is already a prime investor in the UK and is set to increase its engagement. Following successively large investments in the UK's prestigious hotel sector (buying the InterContinental Park Lane, in London, for example) and investment in the Shard development and Harrod's department store as part of a spending spree worth some \$3 billion across Europe in 2012 (equivalent to six week's revenue from Qatar's liquefied natural gas exports), recent reports have stated that Qatar has begun talks with the UK government to invest up to £10 billion in key infrastructure projects in the UK, including energy plants, road and rail projects, and even the Thames 'super-sewer' for London: see Simon Goodley, 'Qatari Investment Fund Pays £400m for Park Lane Hotel', *Guardian*, 28 March 2013; Jim Pickard and George Parker, 'Qatar Lined Up for £10 Billion UK Projects Fund', *Financial Times*, 14 March 2013.
11. For the full transcript, please see: *RUSI.org*, 'Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture and RUSI Christmas Party', speech given at the Royal United Services Institute, 17 December 2012, <<http://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E5097A2CAA2229/>>.

12. *Hansard*, HC, 'DEFENCE: Bahrain', Col. 289W (31 October 2012).
13. Moign Khawaja, 'UK, UAE Enter Defence Partnership, Discuss Other Deals', *Arabian Gazette*, 6 November 2012, <<http://www.arabiangazette.com/Britain-uae-defence-partnership>>, accessed 23 April 2013.

One factor in the decision to boost the UK military presence in the Gulf could also be Whitehall's perception that the French commitment to the UAE is waning, following the latter's failure so far to procure Dassault's Rafale multi-role fighter. Since 2008, France has deployed half a squadron of Dassault Rafales to Al-Dhafra air base in the UAE, warships to Port Zayed and the 13th Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion to a desert base. Whether the UAE decides to buy Rafale or buy Typhoon may well have an influence on future French attitudes towards the defence of the UAE.

14. Karolin Schaps, 'Analysis – UK Gas Prone to Spikes as Qatar Dominates', *Reuters*, 10 February 2012. Also see Carola Hoyos and Guy Chazan, 'UK Warned Over Dependence on Qatar Gas', *Financial Times*, 15 January 2012.
15. Gerges, 'The Obama Approach to the Middle East.'
16. See Jonathan Githens-Mazer, Paul Newton, Andrew Rathmell and Gareth Stansfield, 'Syria: Alternative Perspectives and Implications for the UK', Occasional Paper No. 1, Strategy and Security Institute, University of Exeter, November 2012.
17. Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies/Routledge, 2013); Gareth Stansfield, 'A Year of Endemic Instability in Iraq', *RUSI.org*, 3 January 2013.
18. For analyses of Shia affairs in Saudi Arabia, see Fouad N Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi, 2006).
19. Author correspondence with Professor Lt Gen (rtd) Sir Paul Newton, formerly Commander Force Development Training of the British Army, by email, 9 April 2013.
20. Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', in *Rudyard Kipling's Verse* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940).

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