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UK Strategy in the Gulf and Middle East after American Retrenchment

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ABSTRACT *This paper considers the impact of the possible relative decline of the U.S. and its engagement in the Middle East and the Gulf in particular. U.S. disengagement started under the Obama Administration and seems to be continuing under the Trump Administration. Applying theories of 'rival hegemonic transition,' possible post-American successors are identified. In particular, the UK's intents, capabilities, and strategies as it returns to 'east of Suez' are examined, along with the geopolitical implications of such a return for the shifting balance of power in the Middle East.*

The default U.S. post-war grand strategy has been one of deep engagement with active security alliances and responsibility for regional stability. As the system becomes more constrained with the rise of other great powers such as China and the West declines economically, does American deep engagement still make sense? If the U.S. is in the early phases of relative decline, conventional logic suggests that "great powers moderate their foreign policy ambitions and offer concessions in areas of lesser strategic value"[1] through exercising greater strategic restraint.[2] Many analysts now call for the U.S. to scale back its ambition and retrench to avoid being sucked into regional wars, and to focus its resources in areas of greater concern.

Arguably, the Middle East has felt the American impulse toward retrenchment more than most regions. Former President Obama's pivot to Asia sent a very clear signal that the U.S. wished to concentrate its resources on managing China's rise. His now infamous failure to reinforce America's "red line" in Syria, after the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, only further weakened the U.S. credibility. While President Trump has sought to reassure regional allies like Saudi Arabia of the U.S.' continued commitment, he re-

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It is possible that a post-Brexit UK will view the GCC states as primary partners in security and markets for commercial interests, building upon its extant and relatively stable relationships at a time when uncertainty may be the norm in regard to the UK's engagements elsewhere

mains reluctant to commit the U.S. to nation-building or 'boots on the ground,' a reticence no doubt complicated by Russia's now more assertive footprint in the region.

This then leads us to a question that this paper will attempt to answer: what happens when America becomes more reluctant to take on the mantle of stabilizing regional security orders, at least in the interests of their regional allies? Theories of 'rival hegemonic transition' argue that another nation, or group thereof may fill the strategic void left by American retrenchment, altering the balance of power in ways that are not deemed amenable to U.S. interests. In relation to the Middle East, an important question is what exactly the effects of the U.S. retrenchment will be "upon the region's geopolitical order..." Indeed, "Washington's retreat onto a more 'hands off' strategic approach may further compound geopolitical contestation and instability across the Middle East."[3] For instance, some fear that as America continues to withdraw, China will move in, capitalizing on its already large and growing trade linkages with most of the region's states.[4] Likewise, there is a related fear that American withdrawal may precipitate nuclear weapons proliferation, itself related to the criticism that the United States is not doing enough to curtail Iranian nuclear ambitions –criticism that may well accelerate given Trump's 2018 abrogation of the Iran deal. Most obviously, Russia is now operating forcefully in the region, with strong support for the Assad regime and close links to Iran.

Theoretically, Karl Hayne's work on the successor state model proposes that a hegemon seeking to retrench from a regional order can do so more easily if there is a suitable ally or other external hegemon that can prevent geopolitical instability. He goes on to suggest that two criteria define a potential successor state's suitability: "the *capability* of its strategic preferences with those of the declining state and its military *capacity* to maintain regional order." So which states fit such a description? In this paper, we seek to empirically explore some of these broader theoretical points as the Gulf and Middle East become strategically less important to the U.S. national security interests. We do so by examining the UK's turn to 'east of Suez.' This has been driven by a range of factors, but mostly by the opening precipitated by America's declining interest in the region. The U.S. and the UK share many similar national security interests and the UK has a long history in the Gulf and the Middle East. We will begin by drawing out recent developments in the UK national security

strategy and exploring key issues with it moves to east of Suez. The UK's ongoing relationship with the Middle East will also be conditioned in future years by the likely exit of the UK from the European Union (EU). While the UK already has significant strategic and commercial interests across the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), it is possible that a post-Brexit UK will view the GCC states as primary partners in security and markets for commercial interests, building upon its extant and relatively stable relationships at a time when uncertainty may be the norm in regard to the UK's engagements elsewhere.

The UK Returns to 'East of Suez'

As argued in the 2013 paper, "A Return to east of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Persian Gulf," the UK has sought to deepen its presence in east of Suez in the Gulf.[5] The unveiling of sets of military, defense, and trade arrangements between Whitehall and the governments of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar announced in mid-April 2013 has been consolidated with the HMS Juffair, a now permanent naval base in Bahrain and the al-Minhad air base near Dubai, a key platform for the coalition's air campaign against ISIS. This 'deeper engagement' in the region by the UK presents challenges, opportunities and a delicate balancing act between often shifting alliances subject to both regional and global balances of power.

Specifically, the UK's now consolidated return to 'east of Suez' has committed Whitehall to the security and longevity of the Arab Gulf States –sheikhdoms which display only limited, if any, elements of democratization and which have taken positions opposed to the transformational dynamics seen in the in 'Arab Spring' events across the Middle East; notwithstanding Qatar's important engagements and Saudi Arabia's activities in Syria, the sheikhdoms certainly move to prevent any expression of change in the Gulf itself. As such, by following a strategy of allying itself with counter-revolutionary powers in the Arab Gulf States, the UK has found itself very much on the fault line of the searing sectarianism that is increasingly defining the geopolitical landscape of Gulf and Middle Eastern security. The UK will have to tread a delicate regional path: Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and (less so) Kuwait are now all contending with significant sectarian challenges to their internal security whilst Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in what was a sectarian cold war and is now an increasingly hot one. The ongoing proxy campaigns between the two regional hegemons in Yemen and Syria will only add volatility to that evolving security matrix.

Importantly, the international relations context for the UK's strategy of deep engagement in east of Suez is not just about securing loyal and wealthy allies in

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the Persian Gulf, but has wider global geopolitical import. Specifically, it is also a new, different, iteration of the trans-Atlantic special relationship –a relationship which has been strained in recent years. With the 'Obama Pivot' serving to re-focus U.S. efforts away from the Middle East and towards the Far East and Pacific Rim, the pull of the potential vacuum in the Gulf region, particularly for the UK, is strong. Just as the U.S. was drawn into Gulf and Middle East politics by the UK's withdrawal of east of Suez in 1971, the situation now seems to be in the process of being reversed, with the UK moving early, perhaps opportunistically, to fill the potential vacuum that would be created by a downsizing of the U.S. interests and presence, itself part of a broader U.S. grand strategic recalibration from deep engagement to regional retrenchment.[6] In effect, for the UK, heightened strategic engagement with the Arab Gulf States and with India are new geopolitical expressions of the U.S.-UK special relationship –an expression that may be designed to emphasize to the U.S. the continued value of the UK as a strategic underwriter of the broader U.S.-led liberal international order. For example, the 2015 UK Strategic Defense and Security Review made explicit that the UK's value to the U.S. was contingent on its stabilizing role: "Our contribution to the special relationship includes our European and global reach and influence… We work together to support peace and stability" with a "permanent and more substantial UK military presence" in the Gulf region designed to "reflect our historic relationships, the long-term nature of both challenges and opportunities and to reassure our Gulf allies."

The UK's Involvement in Gulf Security

The 'return east of Suez'[7] is an emotive phrase, on both the Left and the Right in British politics. It recalls the highly controversial decision by Harold Wilson's Labor government between 1966 and 1968 to oversee a broad global retrenchment of UK military power.

While Labor 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,'[8] the former Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, called the decision to withdraw "a dereliction of stewardship, the like of which

British PM May and the Saudi Crown Prince Bin Salman pose for a photograph with other members of the British government and the Saudi ministers and delegates inside Number 10 Downing Street, London on March 7, 2018.

DAN KITWOOD / Getty Images

this country has not seen in the conduct of foreign policy before."[9] 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 from east of Suez. 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 to east of Suez.[10] But there were only small military footholds at Diego Garcia, in the British Indian Ocean Territories, Brunei, Hong Kong (until the handover to China in 1997), and a refueling 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 Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA).[11]

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 –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 neighboring 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 help the Sultan's armed forces, along with a large Iranian Army contingent, to defeat 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 U.S. Navy, of policing the maritime peace as the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 spilled into the Gulf. That the Royal Navy should have returned 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 U.S. government's pointless '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 one and, indeed, the continued viability of the U.S. policy. It took the third heavyweight, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, to reveal, in three large-scale and bloody wars (1980-1988, 1990-1991, and 2003-2011), 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 the U.S.-led coalitions Britain had to commit large forces in both 1990-1991 and 2003-2007 to help defeat the successive attempts by Iraq to alter the balance of power in the Gulf.

In addition to its 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 the Arab Gulf States. These usually came with training teams, to add 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 defense industry and helped successive British governments to subsidize the costs of equipping the British armed forces. The deal, which saw the UK receive payment in the form of 600,000 barrels of oil per day, to an estimated value of £40 billion over 30 years, constituted the UK's largest ever export arrangement.[12] However, it has proved to be as controversial as it has been lucrative. The downside of these agreements came with the complicated oil-barter, offset and export-credit aspects, not to mention allegations of kickbacks to brokers. 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.[13] They have a vested strategic interest in each other's survival to such an extent that it could be argued that Britain never really disengaged from east of Suez, or at least from Arabia and the Gulf. But does this mean that Britain is committed to the defense of the Arab Gulf States in the way it was before 1971, and the formal retreat from its major bases east of Suez?

The Military Vision

Tradition has it that the UK Chief of the Defense Staff (CDS) gives a state of the armed forces speech to the RUSI (Royal United Services Institute) each Christmas. These speeches are usually a routine restatement of policies that have

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been in the public purview for some time. However, General Sir David Richards speech on the evening of December 17, 2012 was different.

In his speech 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 provide more detail as to 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 maneuver 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,

> 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.[14]

To this end, and consolidating these trends, a late 2014 announcement confirmed the establishment of the HMS Juffair at the Mina Salman facility in Bahrain, a permanent naval base and the first of its kind for the UK since 1971. Construction started in late 2015 with then UK's defense secretary, Philip Hammond, declaring that the establishment of the facility meant that the "presence of the Royal Navy in Bahrain is guaranteed into the future, ensuring Britain's sustained presence east of Suez" and was "just one example

Demonstrators, opposing the highly controversial visit of the Saudi Crown Prince Bin Salman to the UK, attend a protest rally in London.

DAVID CLIFF / SOPA Images / Getty Images

of our growing partnership with Gulf partners to tackle shared strategic and regional threats," most notably the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, the realization that the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers will not be able to berth at the Mina Salman facility illustrated that the decision as to where to establish bases in the Gulf may be driven more by political considerations rather than those of military rationale and need.

Similarly, the al-Minhad air base in the UAE, some 24 km south of Dubai, saw a flurry of UK activity, with the runway being extended and improved and facilities installed to allow for the basing of Tornados and helicopters –with the focus, at the time, being to show a muscular presence against Iran. In effect, however, for the UK, the investment in Minhad was more of an insurance policy –giving the option for the rapid deployment of military forces to a base that could be quickly operationalized, with facilities in a mothballed but near-ready state. The base also allowed the Royal Air Force (RAF) to undertake closer exercises with their Emirati counterparts, including in the areas of coastal security (again, with Iran as a focus). The base would later be used by the RAF and their Australian and Dutch partners in the targeting of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria –while the focus on Iran evaporated following the removal of sanctions in January 2016.

The Army, too, seems to be very keen to engage, particularly in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the British Army of the Rhine from Germany and the loss of prime exercise ranges on the continent without any large-scale re-

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placement, until, perhaps now. By re-engaging with the Sultanate of Oman, the Army would find itself located in a country of very significant geopolitical positioning, with thousands of square miles of unpopulated territory ideally suited to the training of military units in the skills necessary to deploy to areas of similar climate and environmental extremes (Oman has a subtropical dry climate, and has both deserts and mountains), and where its units would be received by a government that has always maintained strong links with the UK, both institutionally and in terms of the personal links enjoyed between elites in both countries.

It would, of course, be impossible to leave the irrepressible Qatar out of any development as significant as the British returning to the Gulf. With the long established personal links that exist between Qatari elites and the UK, and the overt and successful attempts by Doha to be involved in international affairs, including in the Arab Spring transitions across the Middle East (though they have been rather less forthcoming at being involved in such events in the Gulf, in Bahrain, for example) and in their immense financial power generated by their huge LNG exports (between 2015 to 2017, Qatar alone has supplied 93 percent of the UK's LNG gas needs),[15] it was to be expected that David Cameron made noticeable efforts to further the links between London and Doha, with the Qatari Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani visiting Downing Street in October 2010, and with the then prime minister visiting the emir in early 2011.[16] With Qatar not needing further assistance in the area of air defense with the U.S. Air Force located at the al-Udeid base west of Doha, and being less attractive to the Army than Oman, Qatar seems exceptionally well placed to take on a coordinating or liaison-type presence for a coordinated UK command. With the emir investing heavily in Doha as the focal point of political, economic, and cultural life in the Gulf (in competition with Dubai and, increasingly, Abu Dhabi), the range of international organizations and Western interests that are basing themselves on the Qatari peninsula provides a useful networking location in a wider regional environment that still remains inherently conservative.

Consolidating these developments, the UK opened a new naval base in Bahrain in April 2018. "Our presence in Bahrain will play a vital role in keeping Britain safe as well as underpinning security in the Gulf," UK defense secretary Gavin Williamson argued: "What happens in the Gulf region has a direct impact on the national security of the United Kingdom, our prosperity and the

safety of our citizens," particularly with the UK's relationship with Gulf and Middle Eastern allies vital to containing threats such as ISIS.[17]

As such, in terms of both public statements and circumstantial evidence, the UK seems to be committed to deepening its strategic defense relationship with the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman, and its ties with Saudi Arabia –which, as home to Islam's two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, would not permit foreign forces to be present– are stronger than ever before.

Gulf Security and the Special Relationship

In the post-war international system, the United States has been the key external hegemon in the Gulf. With the bitter experience of Iraq and Afghanistan in mind, as well the U.S. view that East Asia will be the demographic, economic and geopolitical hub of 21st century international relations, we are perhaps witnessing a change in the U.S. grand strategy from one of deep engagement to one of retrenchment, albeit with regional variations dependent on its respective reading of each region's value to the U.S. national security interests. Whichever way you read it, it is clear that the Gulf and Middle East more generally has been downgraded in the U.S.' relative assessment of priorities, and that the U.S. would now far rather 'lead from behind' in the region. President Trump has committed to the region more, but in limited ways and in the context of other external powers, most notably Russia and to a lesser extent China, becoming more greatly involved and thus constraining the U.S.' freedom of action. It is in this context, and amid the changing regional geopolitics and balances of power that the UK is pursuing its broader Gulf strategy of deep engagement. Why?

First, there is considerable economic benefit for the UK to be not only the leading European player in the Gulf, but also the leading Western one. And it is undeniable that the UK defense 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, which has had its decades of experience of maintaining forces overseas suddenly curtailed, meaning that some of those elements that had made the UK military distinctive from their European counterparts have been eroded. There is also, however, a further pillar supporting the UK's initiative to re-engage with the Gulf, and that is its special relationship with the U.S. In many ways, the CDS's RUSI speech and the actions of UK senior politicians should be seen as signaling to Washington, Europe and the Gulf States, Britain's military intent to do more in the Gulf, with the object of keeping all concerned engaged with the defense tasks in hand, including but not limited to sending reassurance signals to key regional players; helping mediate the

now increasingly 'hot' geopolitical balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran; and degrading and where possible containing the threat of ISIS. On a more abstract but nonetheless fundamentally important 'status' level, the UK has a key interest in continuing to play a global role as a relevant top-tier power helping strategically underpin the still U.S.-led liberal international order; what the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) 2015 called the "rules-based international order."[18] After all, it is this order that provides the context for global trade, the UK's key security alliances and the broader institutional instantiation of the rules based international system of which the UK does not want to be a mere 'free-rider.' These links will only become more important in the wake of Brexit and the UK's search for global trade links and deals.

In reasserting its presence in the Gulf, the UK is once again maintaining a keen focus on what has underpinned its security and defense strategy since World War II: maintaining and nurturing its special relationship with the U.S. With the Obama Administration being distinctly 'cold' to the notion of any sort of special relationship with any country at all, and with the last remaining significant theatre that sees the U.S. and UK working closely together, i.e. Afghanistan, having come 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. In being the first of the European states to move so swiftly into the maelstrom of Middle East and Gulf politics, and in such a willing way, the UK is positioning itself at the heart of a region that will remain keenly important to the U.S. in the future, but not quite so important as areas to the east. In short, the UK is returning to east of Suez in order to maintain the special relationship with the U.S., captured succinctly in the SDSR 2015: "The U.S. is our preeminent partner for security, defense, foreign policy and prosperity. Our contribution to the special relationship includes our European and global reach and influence … We work together to support peace and stability"[19] with a "permanent and more substantial UK military presence" in the Gulf region designed to "reflect our historic relationships, the long-term nature of both challenges and opportunities and to reassure our Gulf allies. We have begun work on a new naval base in Bahrain, HMS Juffair, to support Royal Navy deployments in the region, and we will establish a new British Defense Staff in the Middle East."[20]

A Brexit Imperative?

As a part of the world with which the UK has long-established strategic and commercial interests, the Gulf's relative importance to the UK is set to increase if and when the UK leaves the European Union. Theresa May's government has not been slow in attempting to ensure that the ties that bind the GCC states with the UK have been preserved and even strengthened. Addressing the GCC in December 2016, May emphasized the centuries-old relationship between the UK and the states of the Gulf, noting 'risks to our shared security' and how, in challenging times, "you turn to your oldest and most dependable friends."[21] The inference could not be any clearer –that the UK views the states of the Gulf as perennial partners, and that the Gulf States should view the UK in the same way. Whether the Gulf States do indeed view the UK in this way is an interesting question to ask. While the UK's relationships with some states is undoubtedly close, it remains the case that they operate in a global market place and the UK, while being well placed to engage with the GCC states, has to compete against a range of other international actors that may bring different possibilities and capabilities to any arrangement. History is certainly a powerful motivating factor, but not the only one.

By returning to the Gulf, the UK will be sending a clear signal that, in the Arab Gulf at least, it supports the preservation of uneven or anti-democratic regimes at a time when revolutionary forces are sweeping across the Middle East and Islamic world

It was perhaps with this in mind that subsequent to May's speech, UK International Trade Secretary Liam Fox embarked upon an extensive round of overseas visits to the Gulf States, including Oman and Bahrain. While gaining assurances from leaders in the Gulf about their relationship with the UK, the visits came at some political cost, with critics highlighting the problem of heightening trade with countries in the region. Emphasizing this, the then leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron, noted in reference to the minister's visit to Kuwait '[a]nother day, another desperate visit by Liam Fox to secure a trade deal with a country that has a questionable record on human rights… [a]ll because the Conservative Brexit government is hell bent on taking us out of the single market without even putting the final deal to the British people.'[22]

Despite such criticisms, the tempo of engagement was maintained, and even increased, throughout 2018. Following a state visit to the UK by Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman in March 2018, it was announced that Saudi Arabia would purchase a further 48 Typhoon multi-role fighters, bringing the total value of arms export licenses granted to Saudi Arabia by the UK since

Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, visited the Mina Salman Naval Base in the UAE as a part of the royal tour in the Middle East starting with Oman, then the UAE and Bahrain.

ARTHUR EDWARDS / Pool / Getty Images

the commencement of the war in Yemen in 2015 to $6.3 billion. This stood in stark contrast to other EU members, including Germany that had suspended their arms sales to Saudi Arabia.[23] For the UK, it would seem, strategic and commercial imperatives have begun to outweigh the earlier policy imperatives of good governance and democratization, leading a French observer to conclude that "[UK] foreign policy will revolve around maintaining trade flows, diplomatic influence and military footholds. Beyond a few vague, perfunctory statements, the funding of extremism and human rights violations will continue to be ignored."[24]

Unintended Consequences

Engagement in the Gulf is not a straightforward matter. Indeed, few regions of the world have as much potential for instability, with threats emanating from a range of possibilities. Arguably, the principal context for current tensions remains the fraught geopolitical relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which vie for regional hegemony and whose national security interests now extend into a range of proxy wars ranging from the continued and bloody insurgency in Syria, to the rise of ISIS, to the ongoing Saudi-led campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. Of major concern to the undemocratic sheikhdoms, emirates, and kingdoms of the Arab Gulf, dominated by Sunni elite, is the political mobilization of Arab Shia communities in these states. With Iraq already witnessing the consolidation of a new nar-

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rative of nationhood constructed around a majority Shia identity, the Gulf States have been openly nervous since 2003 of a potential rise in Shia militancy and with good reason. Arab Shia communities have long been denigrated as second-class citizens in the Arab Gulf States. In Saudi Arabia, for example, some 15 percent of citizens are Shia, and this population is concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province. The execution of the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr by the Saudis in January 2016 served to further inflame the already deep hostilities between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The situation in countries where Shia are numerous, but not a majority, is difficult, with their leaders making demands for human rights to be recognized in countries that traditionally have a relaxed view of such matters, such as in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In places where they are in a majority however, such as in Bahrain, the situation is far more severe. Indeed, in Bahrain –a possible and likely location for Royal Navy bases to be established– the country has remained highly destabilized since the commencement of anti-government demonstrations, associated principally with the Shia community, in February 2011. These demonstrations have been forcefully put down by Bahrain's security services, notably with the involvement of Saudi forces.

The ramifications for the UK in forging very close political and military relationships with the Arab Gulf States are without any doubt potentially serious. By returning to the Gulf, the UK will be sending a clear signal that, in the Arab Gulf at least, it supports the preservation of uneven or anti-democratic regimes at a time when revolutionary forces are sweeping across the Middle East and Islamic world, and generating more and more legitimacy. It may therefore prove to be unfortunate timing, to say the least, to be backing anti-revolutionary regimes; the UK, in so doing, will be wide open to the accusation that defense and trade contracts with these states outweigh the moral obligation of pursuing universal human rights and the promotion of democratic norms. The perception of the Gulf States toward the UK plans may also be different from how the UK views its engagement. The threat perception of the Gulf States is increasingly focused upon '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 of the 'soft' power variety, with the Adaptive Brigades earmarked for possible deployment not being structured for significant combat operations, nor being 'at readiness.' By the CDS's own admission in the RUSI speech, they will be, in effect, large and capable training teams.

While the very act of targeted, focused, and intensive training can certainly send messages, it is a bold calculation to make, and a very big assumption to believe that these messages would be interpreted in this way, for example, in Tehran. At an abstract, theoretical, level, the substitution of the U.S. 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 Bahrain and the basing of an Army outfit focused upon training in Oman, along with a handful of Typhoons in the UAE, is tokenism of the sort that communicates one message but lacks the credibility of being able to act as a deterrent, or a force capable of proactive and successful engagement. Rather, there is a danger that the deployment would be of a size big enough to 'get us into trouble,' and not get us out of it when the trouble starts.

In all likelihood, however, a classic 'muddle-through' will be formulated that presents the UK actions and the closer relationship with Arab Gulf States as ultimately seeking to work, in a soft-power way, towards the improving of domestic political situations, with what would for some be a great liberal dilemma remaining acknowledged but unresolvable for the duration of this reinvigorated partnership. But, to what end? Before 1971, being 'east of Suez' had a strategic rationale, had purpose, and could be clearly articulated with reference to imperial legacies, the need to contain the USSR, and the economic benefits of access to oil. It made sense, until the hard-financial aspects of being there became apparent. If the UK is serious in its focus on the Arab Gulf, once again, then a straightforward question needs to be answered, this being *where is the clear strategic purpose in the return to 'east of Suez'?* If it is to deter Iran, then this requires a strategy that has to be multifaceted, internationally mandated, and with a credible and significant military force made available. President Trump's recent abrogation of the Iran nuclear deal, and the splits this has exposed in transatlantic relations, will only complicate the UK's delicate balancing act. If a return is to strengthen the UK's ties to the Arab Gulf States, for a range of reasons including defense, trade, and investments, then this should be acknowledged publicly along with an articulation of why such engagements are necessary, in a period that sees the entire region in a state of political flux, complicated significantly now with the bold assertion of Russia's interests in the Syrian quagmire. This is not to make a value judgment that such alliances are wrong, but they do need to be outlined, articulated, and defended, ideally in reference to a broader strategy and sense of UK national interests, rather than hidden and left assumed.

Endnotes

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